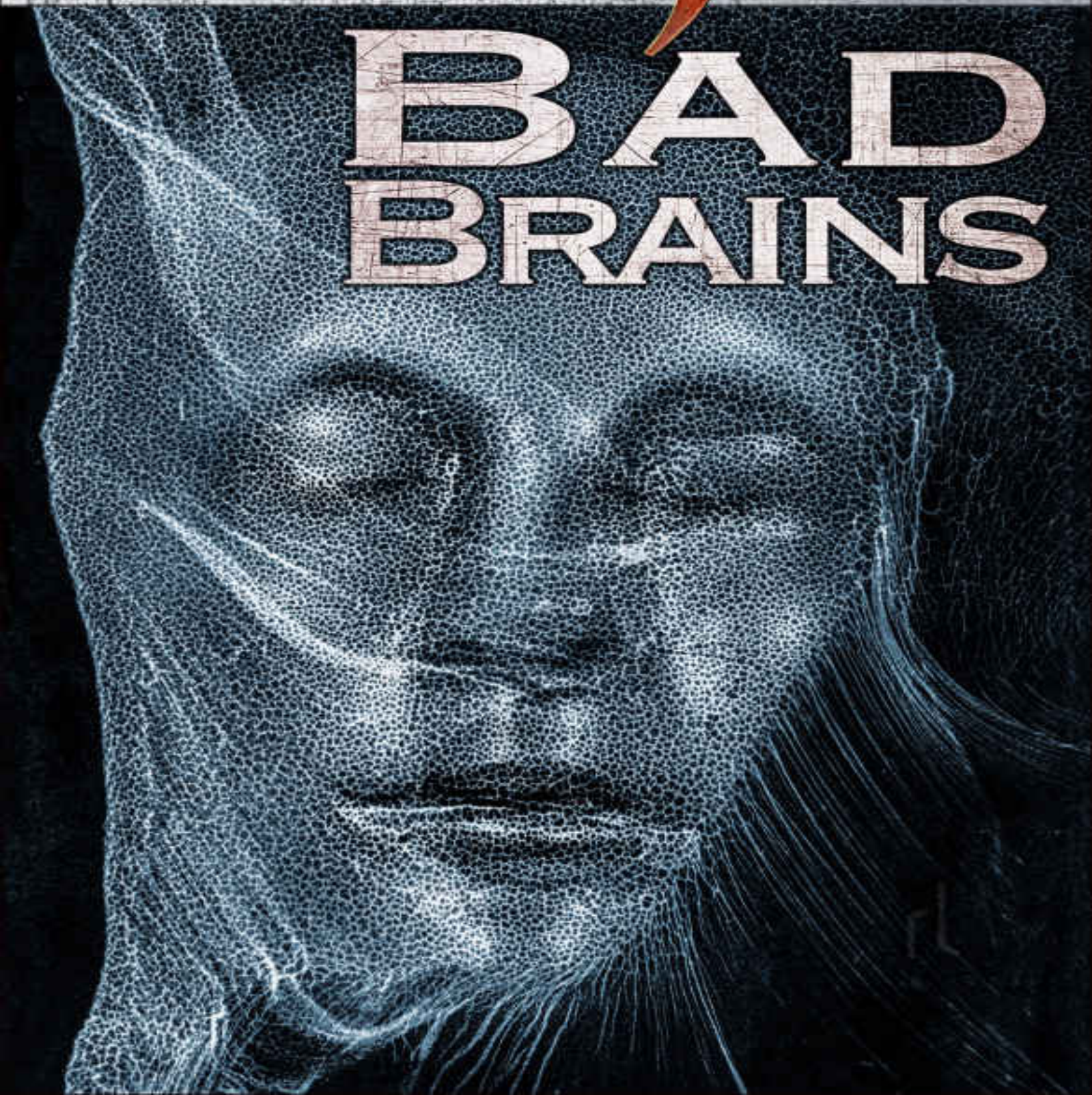
KOJA

BAD BRAINS



Bad Brains

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He has seen but half the universe who has never been shown the house of pain.
—Emerson

Gargoyle benedictive, above his breakfasting head: oils, luscious as blood and framed in red, a reclining sphinxlike form in all the shades of black. Ram’s head atop the dreaming body, poisoned eyes.

It was his favorite, *Criosphinx,* the last best thing he had done, and Austen kept it in the kitchen so he could see it all the time, like now, when he was eating, or reading the paper, whenever he wanted to. Peter thought it was morbid. Peter thought *he* was morbid, living there in his bungalow with the leering walls, twice a gallery’s worth of unsold paintings hung as obsessive testimony to his failure to produce acceptable portraiture. Austen would not try to correct him; let him think what he wanted. Emily had always considered Peter to be kind of an asshole anyway, but he was a friendly asshole, and he let Austen hang around his gallery— "You’re the entertainment,” Peter would say— and best of all asked no questions Austen couldn’t answer with a joke, a shrug, half a smile implying meaning where there was nothing more than weary self-defense. Emily used to say Peter was easy to fool, and she was right. Emily was right about lots of things.

His boiled egg tasted bad, as if soured in the process of fertilization. He had no appetite lately. Looking up at the painting, what fed the sphinxes? Human flesh, human dreams, the tender music of human screams? and where was that from? Emily would know.

Ex-wife; stupid phrase. He still wanted her, missed her, still looked at her pictures—one of them, in fact, right here before him, tacked to the wall beside the coffeemaker, twig-framed and unsmiling on some cold vacation

beach— occasionally even masturbated to them when he felt especially weak, to build with his lonely body a bridge to what had been. *Present,* that was the word, and vivid, she was vivid as a smell in his mind. In the first few months after she left, he had gone hunting, dragging the house for her left-behinds, things like an odd glove, a discarded bra. He would pick them up, hold them, smell them for the comfort of it, but did it so compulsively often that their scent inevitably diminished into the blind spot of his own odor, leaving him again with nothing.

There was no contact between them, she had done her best to lock that door, but it would not have taken much, to see her again, no continent-spanning effort; he knew where she was.

Unsmiling.

No.

The window blinds were crooked: a diagonal stretch of sun touched the gargoyle painting, the colors muddying like stirred water in the light. Already midmorning, he was already late, but it was good to sit there in the empty kitchen, lukewarm coffee and the last of the grocery store beignets, looking up at the painting. No, Peter was certainly right, it was nothing commercial, but it was portraiture nonetheless, the image extracted, sieved and twisted as if the soul, like wax, was malleable under torture. Not what he had set out to do, but, now, what he did best; what was yours chose you, eventually. Happy fact: It was what had brought him Emily. Friends of hers found his work almost extravagantly unlikable; she had gone to an opening at Peter's gallery to see for herself.

And seen him, as well.

What would she say, if she saw him now? Chief cook and bottlewasher at a run-down T-shirt shop, for customers who could barely read the shirts they purchased, his own work not so much lost as drained away, a peculiar directive sap like an orbitless moon; he had done no new work for months now, had no plans to begin again.

Pushing away from the table, from *Criosphinx,* bedroom to put on a T-shirt (sloganless), bathroom to brush, then keys and gone, slamming the door to lock, empty kitchen, empty house, the staggered rows of faces charged and pinned in the instant he knew them best, caught like Prometheus in the moment of fire.

The day started hot, grew hotter. Three people came in the store, none of them customers. Behind the counter, flipping through a two-week- old

entertainment magazine, picturing the faces he saw as he would do them, as portraits; what living snarls, what matchless flat enchantments.

Peter called to tell him about a party: go, he said. Get out of that graveyard for one night.

Scraping back sweaty hair, something wrong with the air conditioner again. "Your problem," mildly, "is that you don't value being alone."

"Not unless I'm going to jerk off. Just go, all right?"

All right. A party, or what passed for one these days: a bunch of people, desultory friends, remarkable in nothing, drinking themselves stupid to the noise of one band or another. Somebody might bring a friend, a new face, he might flirt with her, they might even screw, though lately the condoms in his car had become more nuisance than promise; do I really, he would think, fingering the subtle gleam of their foil, want to need one of these? Better, maybe, to drink enough to sit without talking, most precious without thinking, to sit the whole night in the music's stutter and fall asleep, on the couch, the front seat of his car, wake cramped and empty in the headachy morning and drive himself home.

But Peter was insistent, Peter nagged him into agreement, buy some beer, Peter said, I'll pay you back. So: party store parking lot, hot with a summer's vast fatigue, spotted slick with dripped motor oil, spilled Cokes, the wasteful detritus of a night and a hundred nights. Two girls, neon bra tops and sweaty makeup, shrilling at one another across the roof of a blue Toyota. A fat white man emptied his car's ashtray. Passing, the distorting blur of a car radio and he, bleach-freckled shorts and T-shirt torn sleeveless, all of him sweaty though he had stopped home to change, pushing inside to find the septic dusk mingling flat with the store's interior, the smell of a big dirty cooler opened too many times.

He chose without thinking a twelve-pack of Budweiser, hoisting it cool in one hand, picked up a shriveled package of jerky sticks, a dog's idea of hors d'oeuvres. Good enough. More or less his motto, and guiltlessly: after living high opera, good enough is.

"Anything else?" the clerk said. She had breasts disproportionately huge and no smile at all.

"No." The radio behind her was tuned to loud Top 40; he had to say it twice. As she rang him up he felt the shifty surge of the beer inside him. He had already drunk three from last week's six-pack, bought for another party that had not satisfactorily materialized, frozen in his refrigerator like the

remnants of a bad evening's corsage. "You got anything smaller?" the clerk said.

He shook his head, he had nothing smaller, nothing larger, in fact he had nothing else at all but an uncashed check curled forlornly in the molded curve of his wallet. Above the foggy back coolers, aimed at the entrance, was the surveillance camera, boxy squat, cheap red-eye sheen. Austen saw, stared for seconds. I Am Your Customer. Portraiture for a different audience. "Say dickcheese," he murmured.

The clerk glared at him. "I *said*, you got anything smaller?"

In line behind him, two pissed-off men grew more so, restive with their rustling corn chip bags. "No," hands above the counter like a birthday party conjurer. "I already said I didn't."

"Well, say it louder next time."

"Can we get the fuck out of here tonight?" Big voice, directly at his back; he scooped up change, the beer, threading the jerky sticks beneath the cardboard handle, stepped out into the fist of the heat sideways and nodding, to the camera, the clerk. She said something, lips twisting sour as the door swung to, and Austen smiled, remembered a moment, a joke with Emily, and in that memory made a bow, extravagant and beer no hindrance, almost dance-stepping back, back, loosey-goosey pivot to turn for his car.

And tripping, hard, over the unnoticed four-inch curb.

It was as if the ground had been tricked out from under him, some sly transposition of solid and gas. Momentum, the twelve-pack a concrete block flung by arms now anxious only for balance, all of it taking a mere carnival moment before his forehead hit the pavement with a meaty smack.

With a slow exhalation.

And the breathing in of dark.

So tired, in a place beyond sensation.

"Fuckin' 911," somebody said.

He woke, and hurt, very much.

A smell like plastic, covering his nose and mouth. He tried to talk, tell someone, assuming in a blank way there was someone around to tell. Help me. Help. Hospital. His head was tied down. There were tubes in him. In his arm, up his nose, out his dick. In a minute's rage Emily had once

declared he did all his best thinking with his dick. Maybe they were suctioning out his thoughts, impressions of the tragedy; help. Help me.

A woman’s voice, indistinct vowels. Hope, hot and shiny: Emily? then realizing with paling shame it was somebody else, a nurse, she looked nothing like Emily, sounded nothing like her. Idiot.

Something businesslike-cheery, indistinguishable. Checking all the tubes, touching him everywhere. Looking into his eyes with a penlight, its circular beam presumably touching his lazy left pupil. Look out for those curbs. Don’t drink and walk. "Can I get an aspirin or something?" and a moment’s unhappy surprise for his new, gluey tone, like talking through a mouthful of shit.

She touched his arm and spoke directly into his face, a patois he did not understand. Brows together, mouth moving more slowly, she tried again. Gibberish.

"My head hurts,” reaching to indicate by touch his pain, encountering instead a restrained and bandaged site the size of which frightened him, scared harder by the nurse’s insistent jabber, as if she spoke no known language of earth. Her name tag read ANNA.

“Anna,” he said, trying to be as calm as possible, the pain in his forehead making it nearly impossible not to cry, "I don’t know what you’re saying. Are you speaking English?”

Very slowly, she nodded.

"So am I,” and then wept, small gray tears in the great sea of his terror, trying to squeeze Anna’s hand with fingers swollen and clumped as mittens, groping for her touch like a baby in the dark. Help me.

And when she left, her patting hands all promise, her words as strange as Yahoo speech, he lay without breath, panic on his chest like a gargoyle, a criosphinx, its tongue inquisitive, impudent as the new-veining tubes its dining touch, all language lost and he, primeval, with it in the blue and white room that he shared with no one.

Legs and arms trembling flat against the stranger bed; the dribble of liquid and the seep of time. Trapped mummy forehead, afraid to say a word, afraid to speak at all for fear of what might come out. Afraid, at once, of everything, a sense of dread so absolute the ancient reptile brain stirred under its prod, he almost tried to move, get up, run away. But immediately, as foam crests a wave, came a sense of profound disassociation, as if he observed the terror of another, as if he had become a person sitting cross-

legged inside his own chest, watching. With the calm unblinking eyes of the practiced observer; voyeur's eyes; artist's eyes.

As in the near comer of the room, closest to the door, came a movement, a dustdevil of fluid, liquid, mucus; silver, almost scalelike, delicate as fish skin and stretching out, elongating.

At him.

Watching as it was watched.

Not a human figure.

And he staring back as coldly, as mutely inhuman, as incapable of fear as of flight as, capriciously, it compacted, slipped back into the confines of shadowless square, the empty corner of the empty room.

And he, the *sense* of himself, rushing back, ribbons of tubing dripping continuous fluids, pain like a rolling carpet reintroducing him to his body, exquisite display of its infinite cracks and fissures, all its unsuspected fragility and dismay, how a man might fall like a clown playing pratfall and wake to find himself in agony, unable even to cry aloud for fear of hearing his own voice.

All through the night.

The neurologist had strange mottled skin like old alligator shoes, and an icy down-home manner that Austen found alternately hilarious and abusive. Intubated, shaking from a combination of hunger and sheer weakness, still he understood, now, not all the words but most, not every nuance but every other. The comfort of this was indescribable; but what a thin line he had been walking, all along, the same line everyone took for granted, the ability to simply understand. When his head stopped hurting like a motherfucker he was certainly going to do some thinking about it.

"You're having temporal-lobe seizures," staring penlight into his eyes. "Who's the president?" Tests, simple ones, can you feel this? This? Here? Look up, down. Raise your eyebrows. Let's see you blink your eyes. Behind him Anna the nurse, smiling a little. "I put you on Tegretol," the neurologist said. "Keep you regular. Demerol for the headaches. We'll be doing some more tests. Don't leave town." Right.

When the neurologist had gone, Anna's smile was easier; she lingered. "You're pretty lucky," she said. "Dr. Vickers is a very good doctor."

"What," wishing he could move, roll to one side, ease if not banish the persistent ache in his left shoulder, "what kind of tests is he talking about?

And what’s Tegretol?”

Tegretol, she said—checking tubes, again, checking ears and nose for the clear telltale of CSF leakage, checking for swelling, for infection, so many things to remember, hands unusually cool and moist at the fingertips, almost unpleasantly so—was an anti-seizure medication, an anticonvulsant. As far as tests, there would be CT scans, PETT scans maybe and maybe even a BEAM scan, MRIs, EK and ECGs, lots and lots of X rays.

“Good thing I paid my premiums."

Anna’s smile again. Something, he didn’t hear, opened his mouth to ask her to repeat it when the smell in his nose changed from faint background medicinal to vomit, thick and as insistent, and suddenly he was no one at all, no person in particular but a host of swarming cells tied by plastic, the now receding smell his only anchor to the moment just passed. He blinked at Anna, mildly, as if to say *Oh boy, here comes another one,* but even the thinking of that thought, its bare formation, seemed less his than the bubble and drift of dust motes, skin flakes, the minute exhalations formed by death’s passing and repassing, what a busy place this hospital must be. And the dread, again, like the initiating steps in a ritual dance, and he, quick learner, looked at once to the corner where the silver shiver had been, the mucus cloud, the scaled thing.

To find it gone. But not unseen: look there, in the bathroom mirror, vaguely visible to the sharpest cut of his eye: the near seductive twist of it, look at it, *look.*

And see, in the shimmer, the gleam of recognition because it sees you, too.

Seizure cornucopia.

On and on, vast and dreadful the array of images, smells, sights, becoming no one, people he was not, boasting aloud, hot confessional, things he had never done. He told Anna he killed a girl in his senior year in high school. He told Anna he was a woman named Clare. He told Anna his wife was dead, that sometimes he missed her so much he wished he were dead too. He told Anna he couldn’t paint anymore and didn’t care.

And the headaches, endless, the corresponding urge to scrape out his eyes. Planning the best ways to do this, methods requiring little skill and no time, if they saw him they would try to stop him. Watching the flexible

whorl of the tubing, wondering which were going out and which in. If he pinched one, what would happen?

The Demerol. And the Tegretol. Pissing into a sky-blue plastic urinal, its lip dimpled and stripped by generations of pissers before. Pissing on himself, striping his thigh with warmth.

And in the moments like corridors between headache and seizure, the feelings not, as the drop-in therapist had suggested, the drafty sag of postseizure depression—or, say, not strictly, but mined and shot with a dull self-loathing, the shame of a man who commits a small idiocy that comes back to ruin his life, a man backing up his car to get a better view and tumbling, openmouthed as a broad cartoon, into the unforgiving pit. So far he had told no one the exact genesis of his injury, only that he had tripped and fallen, and that was stupid enough. Stupid enough to make a hole in his head. Stupid enough, perhaps, to make it permanent.

The bed was not bad, the head restraint more taxing to patience than comfort; they kept him clean, answered his questions, medicated him as stringently as they were able. He complained of thirst, was told his fluid intake must be limited to prevent possible edema. What's that? Water retention, in your head. Your brain. Swelling. Oh. And the next day, or the next moment, I'm thirsty, belatedly the remembered reason. What a pain in the ass he must be.

He was so scared.

Peter came to visit, obviously nervous. Brought yellow mums the smell of which seemed to set off another seizure, one from which Austen woke in tears, hands cramping in rhythm like crabs bent crazy on escape, alone in the room but for the faraway wink of silver, fading in the corner like a handkerchief waving good-bye. See you later.

They increased his Tegretol dosage. He thought he could smell the denting wound in his head, suppurating not to decay but wild growth, as if flowers might burst out any moment, as if animals or fish might crawl, Athena, from his forehead. He told Anna his mother was a famous artist in Paris. He told Anna he was a near genius at motocross racing. He spent what seemed like entire days weeping for Emily, begging her to come and see him, only for a minute, they didn't need to talk at all. Just sit in the chair, he said into the space above him, the ceiling flashed with lights no one else could see. Just sit there. Let me see you.

Peter came back and found him lucid, head no longer in restraints. "Looking good," dragging the room's only chair closer to the raised altar of the bed, "back home soon, right?"

'They may have told me." He was so tired. "But I don't think so."

Peter talked about the gallery, he was having a show the theme of which recalled Klee, Klee's early work, there were six artists altogether and they were hell to work with, all of them, they were the most uncooperative narcissistic bastards he had ever seen.

Austen's eyes closed without his permission. "Can you hand me that cup? There, yeah. Thanks." His mouth was always dry; he was permitted ice chips now. He had exactly thirty-one minutes to wait for his next injection. "Cheer up," he said, trying to smile at Peter; he knew he looked like hammered shit, cared only for the effect it had on others. "Maybe I'll die, and all my unsold stuff will go through the roof."

"Oh, you're real fucking funny." Peter bounced out of the chair, more nervous than ever. "You're going to be fine. The nurses keep telling me you have the Einstein of neurologists, there's no way you can't get better."

The Einstein of neurologists visited him as well that day, his presence noted at the tail end of a seizure the transports of which achieved such violence that for long moments Austen was not sure he wanted it to end. See the way the blood moves now beneath his skin, see the cool separation of the unknown from the known as silver slips like channeled water from the bland pallor of the wall, it had evidently been there all along, it had been watching him. Waiting for him? Was it child only of his seizures or did it have a deeper clue? He did not know, he lay like an animal, whining through his mouth, he was no one again, he was empty, he was lined and sketched by a dread so solemn and immense it was like being in church, it was like dying, crossing the border to empty heaven where he stood, stretched and dried like a carcass for feeding, his only sun the unfresh light from the ceiling that resolved itself shamefacedly to a penlight, to a frown, to Dr. Vickers and the vaguely lunch smell of his breath.

"You're due to settle down real quick now," muttering on the same breath something else entirely to Anna, or someone who looked very much like her, the revolving staff whose touch was always competent, whose responses were always businesslike and kind. "One of our nurses says you're a painter. That right?"

No. “Yeah.” The eternal headache. His chest hurt. It hurt to breathe. "I used to be.”

"Why aren’t you now?”

"I quit."

"I’m going to have Dr. Stella take a look at you.”

There was no real reply to that, so Austen let his eyes close, and found himself almost at once in sleep, real sleep, a boon so unusual that he in gratitude lay surrender-still, to find in its deeper waters the sweetest gift of all: the presence of Emily, lying beside him. In jeans and an oversize man’s sweatshirt, black with white letters that spelled no words he could read; her feet were bare. She was warm; he touched her; he could smell her hair, springy peculiar scent like no other. Real or unreal had no bearing, is nirvana real? Is satori? He dreamed of speaking to her, but she touched his lips, one firm finger, and in happy obedience he let the silence drift; it was so good to hold her; he was glad past joy that she was back.

In fifteen minutes he woke to find no one at all beside him and the telling stink, sparkle in his eye’s farthest reach, right before the blind spot; another seizure coming on. He just had time to piss himself before it started for real.

Forever. He knew it. The tunnel of afternoon and he in rigored rehearsal, for the rest of his life he would be prisoner of his mutinied brain, buffeted and cramped by seizures the medication could not adequately control, he had sold his life and freedom for one dumb moment. And it hadn’t even been funny. Not even a little. Panic upon panic, the building blocks of despair, he tried to tell no one but was unsure he succeeded even in that.

There was usually no one around to tell, except Stella and Vickers, neither of whom he suspected of much attention, and the nurses, who were too busy caring for him to hear his ravings. For a while, a week, he had had a roommate, a garishly thin white man with long slivers of yellowish hair that fell forward over his eternally closed eyes; he smelled so bad that, behind closed drapes, Austen had thought him the beginnings of another seizure. After that first night the man kept up a perpetual cry for Demerol, a shot, give me my shot. I need my shot. Nurse! It went on without surcease; it was almost worse than the headaches. Once Austen pushed his call button to ask, “Can you just please give him a shot?”

"He’s not due,” the nurse said. She had a face like an Abyssinian cat.

“How about just to shut him up?”

She looked at him as if he were something less than a tumor. "We don’t medicate for convenience here," she said. “Ours *or* other people’s.” Fuck you too, he thought, you don’t have to sit here and listen to it. It seemed that even through the mist and clamor of a seizure he could hear the man moaning, his sounds a dull reddish whorl in the larger landscape of the room, a petty tornado of small unfillable wants.

The silver thing, itself a whorl, did not seem to care or notice; but that was because it was a creature of dream, an insubstantiality. Occasionally, in his less epileptic moments, Austen wondered if he should be frightened by it, frightened at least by the sheer number of its visitations; only his brain understood the secret omnipresence of that scaly mercury dance, and his brain was no true witness anymore. Which was maybe the most frightening thing of all.

The man’s moans and his presence ceased simultaneously; in a Demerol fog they bore him away, to Special Care. No one else filled his bed. Maybe nobody wants to room with me because I’m crazy, Austen thought, and smiled a little to the empty room. He liked it empty. He did not want another groaner, or worse yet, someone conscious enough to ask, What happened to you? the way they all did, in the hallways, the treatment rooms. Those questions he could always avoid, he simply closed his eyes and acted dead until his fellow patients awaiting MRIs or whatever left him alone; anyway he was certainly not all that compelling, with his dwindling bandage and his head-on-cadaver physique, and besides they had plenty to worry about on their own. But a roommate might not be satisfied with silence, a roommate might want to be foxhole friends. And his brain might be disintegrating, but still he did not want to confess how his accident had happened, it was just too stupid. Tragedy should not make you snicker.

And like ineradicable background the seizures continued, rising to a daily plateau of perhaps a dozen, then with a freshening jolt attained flipbook intensity, one after another, for a long two days. Dr. Stella, who turned out to be a taller and exponentially less amusing version of Dr. Vickers, explained them—in Austen’s lucid moments, which were growing less and less frequent—as a result of impedance of electrical activity, caused, of course—of course—by his softshoe in the 7-Eleven parking lot. Anna said sometimes things got worse before they got better.

Philosophically he was with Anna on this one, plus she never pulled when she changed his bandage.

"Your head's getting better," she said each time. "It's really healing well."

And he, if thoroughly conscious—of her, of his surroundings, of himself as himself and not some cold observer watching this poor asshole get a cracked head mended with the combined graces of time and the medical version of Elmer's glue—would agree, not nodding, she had told him he must keep his head still while she was working on him. And yes, the outside was certainly healing, she let him see in a mirror, he hardly looked at all like a crash dummy anymore.

Inside, however, was another matter.

So: tests. He had become a connoisseur: of the handling, the positioning, the jargon, the same little jokes to put the patients at their ease, jokes they no longer used on him because, well, why bother? He was beyond amusement, and anyway his seizures gave him laughs aplenty. His favorite pastime—and there was always time to pass, no matter the schedule it seemed they were always running behind; so many sick people! He had never guessed—was to sit, or lie, in or on his mode of transport, listening with closed eyes to the stories around him; there were always stories; people had to talk. Even if they were dying. Maybe the tongue was the last to go.

"—sister, she's the one from Tennessee, well, her doctor studied up on my case and he told my sister, he said, You ought to have that brother of yours discharged from that hospital right away. *Right* away, because he said —"

"It's just that I'm tired all the time. And I hate the way—"

"—sixteen months, from beginning to end. The doctors said they—''

"—under my arms. And my back. It feels like needles, you know? Going right through me. I told my husband—''

And he, husbandless, wifeless, lay in his pocket of storyless silence, waiting to be called, to be wheeled in to face the day's variable mercies: the technician who because his name was Austen always called him Tex, the woman who smelled like unshelled peanuts and talked in a thick southerly twang, the guy with the hair extensions who wore his 'do in a rasta bag. They handled him like hamburger, hooking, unhooking, it was pretty as a dance, or exercise, miniature gymnastics the ballet of their hands.

Sometimes they looked tired; sometimes they were impatient. Rarely, though, with him; he was a good patient; he was mute, and did as he was told.

Dr. Stella became a more frequent presence than Dr. Vickers had been: creased white coat and frowning, his habit of ticking thumbnail against fingernail more aggravating even than the smell of his hands, always unhappily reminding Austen of restaurant soap. He seemed to find Austen equally irritating: rapid-fire seizures, his pallid acceptance of same. Apparently the Tegretol should have been more effective, or perhaps it was Austen's peculiar physiology that was hampering the drug. They had switched him from Tegretol to Mysoline, which rendered him sluglike without abating the seizures, then a combination of both, which was even worse, then back to Tegretol. Maybe it would be lizards' feet next, or the blood of pure white hens.

"Hey," Austen told him, "at least the Demerol still works." It was a pale pleasure to anger Dr. Stella, with his nervous tics and his smelly hands; if Vickers was Einstein, what did that make Stella? Freud?

"Dr. Vickers says you're an artist."

Peter had sent a new batch of flowers, fake hothouse tulips as psychedelically red as poppies; Austen avoided looking at them, he would have his next seizure in private if at all possible, and not under Stella's pissed-off stare. He could not smell the flowers but imagined he saw their scent, hypnotic motion through the air like heat distortion.

"I used to be," he said. "A long time ago. I manage a T-shirt shop now."

"We're wondering," said Stella, not looking directly at him, "if your artistic ability is at all affected by your seizures. We would like you to try to paint something."

Oh, great. "No," Austen said. "I don't think that's a good idea at all."

The smell had now achieved a definite shape, distracting him from Stella, drifting in the space above the bed like the heavy curves of a bell. Inside, a clapper began to sway, a movement less strictly rhythmic than sensuous, like a dancer's hips and legs.

"It doesn't have to hang in the Louvre," Stella said, instantly impatient. "We want to be—''

And came down upon him with the flush and glitter of a storm, enclosing him in its thicket of odor, some indeterminate perfume and he staring, coldest interest, at the advent of the silver thing, coy Salome motion

of the scales flexing sinuous to advance, now, almost to the forefront of his sideways sight, nearing true display, so close to him.

Close enough, in fact, to touch.

If he touched it, he speculated, the dread around him now like a grave blanket, a dark familiar finger that in fact touched him nowhere dire, would his hand pass through as through the curtains of a dream? Or would it come away moist, slippery with secretion, musked with odor the source of which he could never guess or name? And which, if either, would prove it real?

He felt his muscles decide before his mind. One hand, excited, rising like flotsam on the waters, reaching—was he? Would he touch it? Would it let itself be touched? He felt each beat of his heart like the separate and distinctive pound of a hammer on flesh. Moving, studied and painful precision, to look and not to look, but it knew, flushed like a deer disappearing, riding the edge of vision and back, now, beyond it, where even his most concentrated stare could not reach.

It was so beautiful.

His head hurt so *bad.*

"Dr. Stella says you’re not cooperating.”

What more? Lying back in the morning’s exhaustion, he had had another CT scan and a long, long wait in the hall, a longer wait for the Demerol. Just now he was unmoored, floating not easy but almost free; he did not want to talk to Vickers about Stella, he did not want to talk about painting at all.

"I’m trying to cooperate.” Liar. He took the flexible straw like a nipple between his teeth, ginger ale taste no match for the thick pukey smell that lay like gravy on tongue and palate, there was really no getting rid of it this morning even though, miracle, he had yet had no seizures; apparently today the smell was no herald. Fine. That was fine with him. The last one had been past believable, had touched the core that lay before serene behind the icy disassociation, had had him convinced that the silver thing he saw might not only be amenable to touch, it might be real.

And that was a side effect he did not want to even think about, that was a delusion too rich for his taste. He did not want to *have* delusions, did not

want a permanent souvenir. Fall down, hit your head, go to the hospital, get better. Like steps in a dance. He had done the first three to the best of his ability. He was trying—no matter what Stella thought, the asshole—to do the fourth, and go home. He was going to have to do it soon, better or not; his insurance had a catastrophic ceiling and he was nose to nose with it now, maybe even past it already. It was hard to keep up with finance these days.

Vickers was still staring at him.

“Why does Stella—Dr. Stella say I'm not cooperating?"

“He wants you to paint. We want to see if these continuing seizures have any bearing on—”

"I haven’t painted in almost a year,” more strongly than he meant, loud against the nasal dwindle of the room. A little blurt of ginger ale on the messy rumple of his gown. “It wouldn’t tell you anything.” He realized his hands were shaking, not the genteel tremor of agitation but a heavy, almost palsylike display; pressing them down, hard, against his thighs, trying to concentrate, hoping this was no new muscular manifestation of a seizure: you’ve had the smells, now try the shakes! “I don’t even know if I can paint."

Vickers shrugged. Looked at his chart. Motions of delay, which was fine with Austen, he had need of some delay himself. It was raining outside, a coating of silver on the windows like the silver thing itself pressing to get in; don’t. Don’t start. How long had it been since he had cared about the weather? How long had he been in here anyway? He was ashamed not to know.

Vickers put aside the chart. “Your forehead’s pretty well healed by now,” he said. "How does it feel?”

“Fine.” Some of the tremor seemed to be dissipating. Maybe just an anxiety reaction at being asked to paint; right. Hey, Peter, is it normal to freak out like that? Hey Dr. Vickers, I think I have performance anxiety, and by the way, do you think hallucinating a silver monster that looks like a big rope of snot is indicative of anything? Like deteriorating mental health? What do you mean, it goes with the territory?

“What?” Foolishly loud. "What did you say?”

"I said, it goes with the territory. The temporal-lobe seizures," obviously repeating, talking to an idiot. "But yours have just gone way out of bounds.”

"I don’t see,” able, now, to move his hand a little without it shaking, first right, then left— inventing little errands for it to do, scratch his nose, rub his eye, careful, though, or Vickers will diagnose you with Tourette’s —"I don’t understand why you think painting might help.”

"Well, you ought to understand how important it is to cooperate with your doctors. We can’t force you to get better.”

"Right.” The tremor had almost gone completely. “Listen, I’ll—” careful now, don’t give away the store, "I’ll try to think about it, all right?"

This was manifestly not good enough. Vickers made a brief, apparently disgusted notation on the chart, rehung it with a sharp emphatic click. No good-bye.

Lying mute after Demerol, the morning’s showers risen now to a true storm and its sound less noise than sensation, an audible bang against the tender tissues of his eardrums, the sheet beneath him a landscape as fragile and remote as the plasma of rain. He thought of the T-shirt shop, of Peter, his medical bills, all as profoundly disassociated from him as the currents of weather on the moon, as the fears of sharks, the panic of insects; he thought of his mother, whom he had not seen in almost fifteen years, who was not, as he had seizure-bragged to Anna, an artist in Paris but a disability-check recipient in, he was almost sure, Wichita Falls, Texas; he remembered the last time he had seen her, leaving her tired with an anger so old it was almost nostalgic; but not then, not quite, not yet. On admittance here, in the hospital, they had asked him about relatives, next of kin; somebody. Anybody.

"Nobody,” he said. “No family.”

You checked married, here, on the form, they said; they showed it to him.

"I wouldn’t even be here if my brain was working properly," calmly, as if they ought to have known better; they left him alone then. God knows what they wrote on their forms.

More rain on the window. Past the heavy swing of the door, something rolled to an abortive stop. His left hand itched and he wanted to scratch it, but it seemed like too much work, too convoluted a task. Maybe later. When it wasn’t raining so hard. At least his head didn’t hurt. At least the Demerol was still working. For now.

Am I, he thought, going to die?

Emily.

He wanted Emily. He wanted Emily so bad it made him feel like screaming, even now, in this underwater detachment brought on by drugs and seizures, by the constant low-grade wonder of his current state of consciousness—sometimes he had to stop and focus, make sure he was there and not somewhere else—he wanted her to come, and simply sit, and touch him. Hold his hand, maybe, or touch his forearm. Wanted the low impatient music of her voice, wanted her to be scornful of the doctors and friends with the nurses, wanted her to click brisk through the shows on the crane-armed TV he never watched. Wanted to whisper into her ear that he was scared, every minute of the day he was scared, of the drugs not working, of being here forever. Of never painting again, ever— *I won't* is a lot different from *I can't.* Of never seeing her again. Of the seizures themselves, the things he saw, the silver thing and his hallucinations that it might be real, waking to shame like a drunk after a bender, embarrassed by the thoughts that had seemed, then, inevitable and right. Scared of being crazy. Of dying here, riding one seizure forever until he woke, like a double take, dazed and brilliant in some long eternal minute. Wanted her to say, You are not going to die, so don't be stupid, stupid. Wanted her to say, Don't be scared. I'm here.

I love you.

And cried, an aching in his throat, the rising water in his eyes and found as well that despite the rocking arms of the Demerol he was conscious of the long glitter of the silver thing, slipping from its canny post on the rainy windowpane, impossible glide to move closer so he was nearly seeing it with head-on eyes. Soundless, he had smelled nothing, had not even felt the seizure come on. The sheets of his bed were rough, the rain now the sullen bark of atonal noise, all his senses tuned up a notch, a pitch, turned up past ten to some numeral bespeaking the unspoken, a ranging hemisphere as charged and sizzling as the unseen landscape of his temporal lobes.

Where, it seemed, the silver thing did its hunting unimaginable, on which dangling periphery made its home.

See it, now, study to the limits of vision the way it moves, the strop and lounge of what might be limbs. What would it be like to see it in the rain? underwater? in the dark? From what inner distortion had his brain manufactured this animus, and most important, most of all, is it real?

Ask it, he thought. Just ask it out loud.

The absolute color of it, the pure silver, the sheen. Nacreous, was that the word? Prismatic with a prism of no color at all.

Oh my God, I'm going crazy.

Do it.

"Are you real?"

Whisper like the crack of dry-fissured flesh, distorted. Outside it began, at last, to thunder. In the hallways the nurses remarked to one another what a quiet afternoon it was turning out to be.

* * *

"Apparently," Stella's smile, almost disconcerting now that it had finally appeared, "the Tegretol is starting to do its job."

The faithful Anna, smiling too. Patting his knee through the sheet. "You're a stubborn one, aren't you?"

He smiled back in false agreement, lips like rubber, shrugged like a clown on cue. He did not want to mention that he could remember absolutely nothing from the time of his last shot until perhaps an hour or two before, coming to while eating a kind of dinner, how long had he been that way? Unwilling to spoil this party, it was so late, had they stayed late just for him? Windows dull with night, the hospital's inner fluorescence like some strangely shining heart. Core. Center. Creamy center, like his brain. Which everyone seemed to think had improved almost literally overnight, which around here added up to two days. Three?

"No seizure now in over thirty hours." Stella looked very proud of himself. Maybe he ought to be. "We're going to keep up that hourly watch on you, but things are really looking up."

"Thank you," unsure if this was the proper response, but they seemed pleased. He was able to get Anna's attention, signaled her to stay a minute after Stella had gone. By the bed, the empty one, a lozenge of stripped-down white; what had finally happened to the Demerol guy, was he home now? Dead? "Hey." Smile at her; show no panic or confusion. "What's the real story here?"

"The real story is," smiling back, she had bags under her eyes, he had never noticed that before. Improved concentration on surroundings: a good sign? 'That you *are* getting better. Dr. Stella's been able to arrest the seizure cycle with this particular dosage of Tegretol."

"Which is?"

‘Twelve hundred milligrams a day. Which sounds like a lot, but it isn’t really so bad.” She rose from the bed, gentle swing of her stethoscope in one unconscious hand, a habit, like Stella’s nail-clicking; he had never noticed that before, either. "You’ll get used to it.”

He shook his head to say, I don’t understand. "Well,” she said, “Dr. Stella will probably put you on maintenance after you leave here.”

"What does that mean?”

“It means you’ll have to take pills, have regular checkups. That’s all. Nothing bad.”

“For how long?”

‘With the type of seizures you had, probably always.”

"Always?”

“Hey, hey.” Patting him again. "It’s only a few pills a day, it’s no big deal. After what you went through here, it’ll be a breeze. Anyway, I shouldn’t even be talking to you like this. Just play dumb when Dr. Stella brings it up, okay?”

Play dumb. "Sure." Smile. ‘Thanks, Anna.”

"Hey, no problem.” Swinging the stethoscope, gone.

And he in the surprise of pure consciousness, like breathing sheer oxygen and nothing but; lying in wait: for the headaches, for the dread and the smells and the sense of the other. For the silver. Wondering as he lay, as the orderly breezed in and out, as the lights in his room were turned down for the night: he was better, now, wasn’t he? Almost cured? Then why no elation, no relief, why were Stella and Anna happier than he was?

I’d be happy, he thought, if I knew where those two days went. Up, sitting, talking, undergoing exams, being wheeled away for tests, and no memory of it at all. Why? Don’t tell them it happened, just ask what would happen if.

He knew. Hmm, they would say, it’s that scar tissue on your brain, it’s causing more problems than we thought; we’ll have to check it out; you’ll have to stay a little longer.

No. He would not tell them. Nothing bad had happened, anyway, just a simple lapse of full attention; all right, it was a blackout, but nobody had even noticed. Maybe it was just a side effect of the Tegretol finally taking hold, maybe some last-ditch pyrotechnics from his brain as it righted itself, steadying like a gyroscope as the drug took the reins finally and for good.

If it happens again, he promised himself, then I'll tell them. But not now. I just want to go home.

It took a long time to fall asleep. He could hear the sounds of the hospital around him, slowed sounds, respiration of a great dozing engine. He found that he was waiting. For pain? For a seizure?

None came.

Now, he thought, on his back, free to move, looking up at the ceiling, he would never know if the silver thing was real or not.

Good.

He slept the night through, woke, felt okay. Not great, but okay was great under his circumstances; even Stella said so. And Vickers, when he stopped in.

"Looks like you're about to check out of our fine hotel," he said. "Good. Getting tired of you," and he winked. Was that meant to be shared or just his tic, like Anna's stethoscope, Vickers's nails? Austen smiled back, he was game, he could take a joke. Ha ha ha. Being responsibly conscious all the time was going to take some readjustment.

"Got to get you off that Demerol first, though. Don't want to turn loose any junkies."

Surprise: He had not even considered that. No more pain, no more medication, what could be easier? But he found he missed the Demerol, missed it in a wistful physical way, missed the cotton-batting sensation, the pleasure that was not. Apleasure. Was there such a word, for a sensation that was less than true feeling but more than the empty absence of pain?

Besides the gentle detox there was PT, physical therapy, to make sure he still remembered how to walk, to maneuver his body in and out of chairs, doorways, to check for balance problems or deficiencies in gait. Afterward he went back, walking, to his room to sit, not lie in bed, his chair by the window to watch the trees, the cars going past or, sometimes, turning in the hospital parking lot, the gas station and fruit market on opposing corners. Fruit, he would like some oranges, a kiwi fruit, expensive. He felt the soft water of saliva; it would be good to eat real food again, food of his own choosing.

He called Peter, using the phone for the first time since his admittance. It was a strange sensation to do anew something you once did every day without thinking. 'They say I can go home tomorrow," voice hushed for

some reason, was he worried their permission was revocable? Sorry, there's been a mistake. "Can you pick me up? About noon?" And, more quietly still, "Can you bring me some clothes?"

"Sure," Peter said. "All better now, huh? Told you so."

They gave him a list of instructions—chiefest, in red capitals, DO NOT DISCONTINUE YOUR MEDICATION—and things to look out for. symptoms to signal the onset of his own neurological Armageddon; plus they helped him button his shirt; so many buttons, childishly clumsy his hands; he was shaking a little when he was done. Strange, to wear real clothes again, clothes with separate entities: jeans and T-shirt and sneakers, real shapes and textures. The whole experience was strange, operatic near tragedy resolving tidy into a list of Do's & Don'ts, of hands that shook a little, of a prescription he must fill as soon as he was discharged, downstairs at the hospital pharmacy.

Peter watched him sign himself out, watched him give nurse Anna a quick and bashful hug, helped him to the car. He had brought nothing to carry away, he left nothing behind, the bloody T-shirt and shorts of his admittance long since discarded by the ER staff. A scar on his forehead, a tendency to walk a little more slowly, informed by a vast underlying care of the way the earth turns in relation to moving feet.

Peter seemed to be driving very fast. It felt good. It was not a beautiful day outside but it felt beautiful. Still summer, and Austen closed his eyes, leaned fully back against the seat.

"Hey," Peter said, "you up for lunch? My treat."

"Sure." Through closed eyes the faint reddish dance of veins, lines, the fragile skin of tired eyelids. "How about carryout somewhere?"

Not long, a few left turns, his body cradled by motion. "You'll love this," Peter said. "Drive- through Thai. Hotter than hell. Just what you need after that hospital pablum crap."

And strangest of all, less than ten minutes of drive to find himself back home, Peter taking the white paper bags faintly blotted with gravy, or grease, or something, Peter opening the door. Stepping into his house, seemingly untouched, musty from disuse and it smelled it, smelled too of a faint rancid souvenir. The odors seemed strong; for a moment Austen thought it might be seizure prelude, braced himself to tell Peter Take me back. But it was just stink, plain stink, he cured it himself by turning a twist-tie around a tall plastic bag. No messages on the machine; Peter had

retrieved them, as well as his mail, rubberbanded now on the kitchen table, beneath the endless crouch of *Criosphinx*, a thin stack patient for his eventual regard.

They ate in the living room, out of the bags. There was still beer in the refrigerator—and who in that parking lot had finally drunk his abandoned Budweiser?—and they each drank two. Be careful with drinking, Stella had said. Alcohol's no good with this medication.

Peter wiped up with his second napkin. "So what was it like?"

"What?"

"You know. The fits. Seizures. Like doing acid?"

"No." Looking at the portrait behind Peter's chair, a huge nude, muscled matron like hell's wardmistress in shades of tar and blood, bones concrete, chief in the house of pain. Iron pasties formed into faces crazy with greed, stuck leechlike on her thick rubbery nipples; she herself wore a bondage mask with no slits at all for the eyes. "Not like acid."

Chewing. 'Then what?"

Like smelling things, like being scared. Like dread. Being inside your body, but not your soul. Pain, headaches, tubes up your dick. Seeing things. Hallucinations. "No fun." Picking up his fork again. "This is good."

"Hospital food, ugh. Listen, how about stopping down at the gallery tomorrow? Too bad I don't have that Klee show up, all those fake fucks, you'd've loved it. You should have been at the opening, you would not have believed the way some of these people think that with a little . . .''

And so on; it was good to sit listening to Peter, like watching the cherished gambols of a particularly clever monkey, but he wanted most to be alone, and after a time Peter felt it. Gathering up the bags, the empty cans. At the front door, "Call me if you want to come down. Or call me anyway," in the driveway, waving, driving away.

And he alone. Tired, now, he lay where he was, on the living room floor, staring up at the faint skinlike cracks in the ceiling, smiling to think he had cracks in his ceiling, too. The floor was hard but he had had enough of lying in bed; he moved only once, to fetch a pillow from the couch. Above him on the walls the various faces, staring, suffering, silent or enraged, the flamboyancies, the flagellations and defeats of his personal gallery, his own eternal show; not good enough, but good enough for him.

Safe and silent he lay beneath his faces, all the shapes he could control, and fell to sleep, curled about his pillow, closed and trusting eyes. And in

the empty evening kitchen, *Criosphinx,* adrift in dusking shadow as across its surface, passing sure and stately as pain protracted, came a steady, stealthy wash of silver, like mercury, like mucus and like rain.

2

Being sick is an expensive proposition; even his pills cost more than he had expected. He had joked about keeping up his insurance premiums, but there were ceilings and limits and he was definitely pressed against both. Back to the wall; back to work.

Which in its way was good; he could fall into it like the familiar constraints of an uncomfortable position, he could work any and all hours he chose, and he chose mornings to evenings, convenience store lunch and dinner eaten behind the counter with the radio's cheap chime drowned out by the air conditioner, the gritty occasional rasp of the door. People asking directions, wanting to use the bathroom. Acne and big tits, acne and skinny arms, in love and buying T-shirts with each other's names, TINA and JAMES and what will happen in five years, five months? Will you still love me tomorrow? How about by the end of the week? He had had passing impulses to call Emily, say *Guess what happened to me?* but so far had successfully controlled them. She had never had much of a fund of pity, and anyway pity was nothing he wanted from her.

Seated overwarm and half slumped, elbows on counter, a lazy mental addition: ten a.m. to eight p.m., six days a week, at what he was making he would be working here forever. Of course it made no difference, what else did he have to do? Go home and study *Criosphinx* for the millionth time? Hang out at the gallery with Peter and watch papier-mache mockups of bad editorial cartoons sell for twice what he made in a month? Or, least likely, drag out the canvases again, do work that in the end satisfied only himself? It was no longer enough, to work that way; besides, he joked with Peter, he was running out of wall space.

"You're wasting yourself," Peter said. Another carryout dinner, another lecture. If not for Peter, he would have no visitors at all; would that be bad?

Feet on the chair, "Do you know how many sorry fucks I know who would kill to be able to do what you do?”

“What, work in a T-shirt store? No, I’m serious,” leaning forward, arms pressed hard against the table’s edge; he could feel his heart, flesh mallet, working like the gallop of an aging horse. "I’ve got doctor bills up the ass, Peter, I can’t afford art for art’s sake.”

'There are people who can.”

"Who, your Medicis?” Flipping a grain, two grains, three grains of rice, lining them in a row, cold obedient maggots. "I don’t want to be anybody’s pet artist.” Four grains. Six. "I don’t want to be anybody’s pet anything.”

“Except Emily.”

All the grains now washed in gravy, sluggish as cooling blood. “Excuse me,” not really smiling, standing. “I have to take my pills.”

In the bathroom, stubby plastic cup and the lukewarm dribble of tap water, he would have to fix that faucet, did he still remember how? Doctor, I can’t seem to recall which end of the wrench to hold and which to suck. They had admonished him to report any problems with memory, with smells, with all the things on the list; his own list had blackouts; so far nothing had happened. Tired, yes, but that would be normal, wouldn’t it? He had sustained quite an insult, head split open, bruised brain bounced like candy against the slick inner walls of his skull, his—

Silver.

Trickle mixed with water, so subtle he barely saw until he could not stop seeing, torsive gripe in his bowels like the flex of grinding claws, mingled flow in thin cascade and he dropped the cup, hollow plastic sound, his empty fingers pressed in empty fists. Something fell.

Across the mirror’s face the long wash, beautiful, horrible, half there, like molten rain and he trapped to stare without that promontory plain of disassociation, nothing but the human dread of his naked eyes as it glittered and shrunk in strange burlesque, now you see it, big boy, now you don’t.

Peter, knocking hard at the door.

“Hey! You all right in there?”

Hands against his mouth, Munch howl. Adrenaline clench in the muscles of his back.

There was nothing at all in the mirror.

“Austen. Are you all—”

"Fine," he said. Sweat all over his body, chilly as piss. Maybe he had pissed himself too. "I dropped the glass.” The pills lay beside the toilet as neatly as if he had placed them there. Sluicing vertigo as he bent to pick them up.

Oh please no.

Peter in the hallway, not trying not to stare. “You sure you’re okay?"

Slow step and close the door behind him, politely shielding a guest from some sordid household sight. “Yeah. I’m fine. Sometimes the small motor skills, you know,” standing uncomfortable and sideways so Peter couldn’t see the wet, passing jargon as if it made sense. When Peter left, still that look on his face, almost funny: are you crazy or am I. The fat ass dominatrix in disdain, black-masked saintless patron, a patron saint and he in her shadow, watching Peter’s taillights. Closing the door, he was assailed with an exhaustion so intense he had to sit, right now, right where he was, legs collapsed like a Chinese puzzle into some approximated shape. He had a headache.

Had it been like this, in the hospital, this degree of throb, this sizzle against the eggshell walls? Was it the aftermath of a seizure? Harbinger? And why hadn’t there been a smell?

He sat until he could not sit, lay flat, there on the floor, in the dark, eyes closed in the cave of pain and nervous fear, tired, *tired,* and thought of sleeping there, just as he was, thick slumber like an ethered insect and waking to find himself silver: drenched, slick to the honeyed eyes and clotted, membranous, unable to move. As above him the slender grin of no human mouth at all.

What’s worse: hallucination, or not?

It’s starting again.

Go to bed, asshole.

Still it took him a long minute to gather himself, to rise. He turned on the hall light to walk to his bedroom, and as he passed he did not open the bathroom door.

In the morning it was all blessedly stupid, boiled egg and early to rise and it stayed stupid all week long. Peter’s questions, were the seizures like acid, well maybe more than he knew and that had been a flashback, sort of, just an echo in his healing brain abetted bright by nerves and imagination, nothing bad at all. Nothing to call the doctors about. He had a checkup

scheduled for the following week, and if he was still having problems, well. Well.

There was an opening at Peter's gallery that Friday, some woman who did watercolors; he showed up late, after work, stood around holding a plastic cup of oily blush and trying not to make conversation; there was no one there he wanted to talk to, Peter was busy, he felt more sadly out of place than in the worst of the hospital corridors, wheelchair-bound beside the weak and weakly drooling, the talkers, the compulsive starers, at least they had something to stare about. Positioned not in a corner but by the door, propped open by a chunk of concrete stenciled with the gallery's name, what breeze there was unkind in the larger gasp of a humid late summer evening. A good night not to be here. A good night not to be anywhere. On nights like these he and Emily used to sit on the roof, drinking beer and talking. Looking for stars through the dark humidity. Once she had wanted to make love up there; he was scared of falling, embarrassed to say so, instead said nothing at all.

"Well?" she'd said, shorts already unzipped, thin untanned line above her panties. Hands between his legs, her breath a whisper on neck and ear. "Why not?"

"No." Oh she felt so good. "Somebody'll see."

Long squeezing stroke, her teeth grazing his jawline, moving to his lips. "Who?"

"I don't know," lame. "Planes."

"If you don't want to fuck, just say so," and, pissed, pulled away, back, pulled off her tank top anyway to lie silent, staring at the stars. Or planes. He had tried to talk to her but she had ignored him; finally his crawl, defeated, barefoot through the attic window and she still there, sweat on the concave swoop of her belly, beautiful as some strange ornament; that night she had not come to bed at all. Was that why she left him? he was too scared? Too scared of things she wanted? Was that true?

Two women, one in red and one not, both too loud—how many little plastic cups had they emptied?—and coming his way. "Hi!" happy as if she knew him, the larger of the two. Big shiny teeth.

Silent, falsely smiling, saluting them with his half-empty cup. "Hi," the woman said again, more insistently.

"Hi." The wine went down like medicine. If he turned his head very slightly to the left, he could see down the blouse of the shorter woman; it

was not a necessary exertion. They were both smiling at him. He couldn’t think of anything to say. “How do you like the show?"

"Oh, I think it’s excellent, really superior work. She’s really going places.” Red must be a collector. "You know, she’s done a few nudes here and there, but never anything with this scope.”

Scope. Right. A tit the size of a fender. He drank the rest of his wine. Over Red’s shoulder he could see Peter laughing, squeezing some woman's elbow. Almost a third of the paintings had the telltale sticker beside them, a red circle indicating the work had been sold.

“Are you familiar,” Red again, or still, "with her early work?”

Madame, I would rather burn out my eyes with cigarettes. "No," fingers squeezing, squeezing his empty cup. "No, I’m not.”

"She studied with John Boston,” said the friend, glancing at Red for corroboration. “For years.”

"Mmm.” He turned to stare at the big water- color tit again, its false contours, the craggy range of the nipple like some chrome-tipped Everest, silver molten as discharge, hey lady you better get that looked at. Hey lady

the silver moved.

Perception pulled, the painting itself seemed to shift, as if the nude moved in her artificial sleep, giantess disturbed and see, there, the sly crawl, the shudder beneath the real imperceptible as a clot in a vein, creeping shine and they were looking right at it, couldn’t they see it? It was right there. It was right *there.*

It was trying to get out of the picture.

Turning his back, soldier swivel and the floor cold now beneath his feet, he walked past them, straight out the door, straight to his car, sat inside with windows rolled and doors locked, shaking. In the heat. He didn’t smell anything, just the sour lip of the empty glass, faint endless odor of gas and exhaust. He felt no headache, yet, just the trebled exhaustion of fear, worse than the last time: things were happening, again.

Oh God, please.

And driving, carefully—still no legal right to do so—windows down to admit the muggy night and he thought again of Emily, wished for her with a desperation strong enough for tears; now he would lie naked on a pure verticality for the chance to hold her, rest his cheek on the hill of her collarbone, hide in her body until there was nothing else to see.

The house was humid as the inside of a glove, empty; the lusterless sheets of his bed and above it dark alkaloid glow: *Creatrix*, the archwife, nightmare austerity with her legtrap and scepter, robes made of patchy skin and pleated with bones, tiny, as if filleted from the hands of infants. The woman who had commissioned it had refused to buy it afterward; she had wanted her deposit back; she had asked him Why. Why did you do that? she kept saying. Why did you do that to me?

He touched it now, one finger gentle on the tender peaks of paint. All greens and rotten golds, the colors of a field sunk past fallow, a pure and wanton parable of decay. Yes. And nothing there would move without his knowledge, nothing there would shimmer with a knowing, growing gleam. Most of the night he lay sleepless, waiting for something to happen, sweat on his forehead, his armpits, slick down his temples and ribs. Waiting for the seizures to start again, jackhammer buildup into some rough crescendo that this time would split his brain in two. Waiting to wake in the hospital, under restraint or not for days; or not at all. Waiting, under siege, for Emily to call.

"How are you, Austen?”

Stella’s office but not Stella, the partner whose name he did not know, no name tag on the spiffy coat tailored not to seem medical, unthreatening shade of ivory less clinical than white. Call me Doctor. Her hands were incredibly cold. Maybe she had a circulatory problem.

“Okay,” he said. Barefoot on the table, each tiniest shift announced by the crinkling sanitary paper, he had been through this so many times, he could dance it with his eyes shut. She was thorough, she went through the whole checklist as if he were a brand-new patient. First the cranial nerves; the swing of the bright disk to check his eyes’ ability to follow; then the litany: look up, look down, to the left, right, good. Close your eyes. Raise your eyebrows. Simon says raise them again. Stick out your tongue, move it, put it back in your mouth, way back. Touch your chin to your right shoulder. Left shoulder. Good.

Her cold hands clasped in her lap, looking up at him from her red plastic chair beside the exam table. "Still taking your Tegretol?"

His nod. The whole office smelled like one of his seizures, but the smell was too real; it was the border places you had to watch.

"Any problems with the dosage?”

How should I know? "No."

"Any problems in general? Headaches, anything like that?”

Well. Like a chill down his sides, almost embarrassing the length of his giveaway pause; he had to say something. “Um, I have had a couple headaches," touching his forehead, “here, and here," twin fingertip graze of his temples.

"Anything else? Any abnormalities?”

That would depend on what you think is normal, wouldn’t it. "Well,” again. Go slow. "I’m a little bit, a little concerned. I think I might have experienced a—’’ slow. "Like a preseizure state, sort of.”

Her pen like a raptor, ready. “What do you mean?"

He did not look at her, instead at the wall beyond her, ugly walnut paneling, weren’t neurologists supposed to be rich? On the near wall a print, insipid, a watermill and a man beside it presumably in reverie, maybe he was really in a preseizure state, whatever the hell that meant. "Well," again. "It’s a little hard to describe.”

I see things, Doctor.

"Please try."

Her hair was almost the same shade as her shoes. “Once or twice I thought I, I thought it was going to happen again. I felt the same as if it was happening."

Writing, she had a hard little script, bet she poked holes through the paper. Sweat on his palms and he brushed them against his thighs, up, down. His bladder felt suddenly full.

“Did you experience any strange smells? Tunnel vision?” No, and no, and the jackpot question: "How about hallucinations?”

Silver, framed elusive in a mirror, stretched coy beside smears and water; no. "No,” he said, voice dry on the lie. “Nothing like that. It’s hard to explain, but I know it when it happens."

She wrote something, small, quick, then sat back, legs crossed at the knees, square knees like a soccer player’s, and told him about postconcussion syndrome, the post-traumatic symptoms that follow a serious blow to the head: sleeplessness, headache, dizziness, lethargy, depression, he was entitled to them all. "Certainly your symptoms are something to report,” capping her pen, tiny percussive blow. “But don’t be too worried."

Waiting. His hands, damp again.

"What should I do if it happens again?”

"Well, for now I’m going to schedule you for some tests, mostly precautionary, I don’t think anything serious is happening here. But we like to be sure.”

We sure do.

"Let me or Dr. Stella know if anything else happens," smiling, shaking his hand, her own quite dry and cold as ever, walking out to leave him, socks and shoes, a tiredness in his motions unfed by the shimmering anxiety of a seizure’s birth; just tired. When he got home he lay on the couch and slept for three hours, waking open- mouthed and nervous pounding heart, listening to the refrigerator click on, and off, and on again.

The tests came back negative, or clear, or whatever. Sitting with Dr. No Name again, nodding his head, smiling. Yes. Good news, yes, great. Right. Keep track of the post-traumatic symptoms, some patients liked to keep a spiral notebook handy. No, no Valium, he could manage his anxiety reasonably well on his own. But thanks. And out the door, closed breathless in the heat, windows open on the long drive back to work.

Nothing wrong.

Right.

Peter came over, no call, two bottles of warm wine in a plastic sack. Austen was sitting out front, dry spiky lawn, digging one toe at an anthill, new harmless obstacle for the dimwit industrialists to overcome. Sunglasses and T-shirt ripped to the nipples, washboard belly too white for the summer’s age. His gym shorts said NEW HORIZONS.

"Hey,” he called to Peter, popping cool and dry from the air-conditioned envelope of his car, like a fashionable new hand appliance from its hermetic packaging. Peter’s shorts had a thin crease down the sides.

"Hi yourself. Got any ice?”

"Door’s open.”

Banging in, then out, two plastic tumblers with four cubes each, crappy-looking wine as purple as no-brand jelly. "What a fuckin’ day. Ouch. What the hell’s the deal with your grass?”

"Nothing.”

"Well, water it once in a while, all right? Shit. You know a woman named Gina?”

Two ants ran a blind obstacle course on his left baby toe, then up to sure stubborn collision. "No.” The wine tasted as bad as it looked. ‘Why don’t you ever drink beer?"

"Gets me too drunk. Listen, there’s this party coming up, right? At Mike Miguel’s house, you know Mike.” He didn’t, but he nodded. "And this Gina keeps calling, asking are you gonna be there. She says she wants to talk about buying some of your stuff.”

“Oh yeah?” He drank more wine, fingers slick with condensation. The sun moved behind a cloud. "Do you think she means it?”

Peter’s loose shrug, eyebrows high over shiny iridescent sunglasses. "Who knows? She sure keeps calling.”

A car went by, dark car like Emily used to have. The ants had abandoned his foot. Peter seemed to be waiting for some kind of conclusive answer, so Austen shrugged, smiled a little. "What time’s the party?”

Mike Miguel had half an acre of land and a house with thirteen rooms, most of them closed off; the steps leading up to the front door were missing risers; two of the windows were broken, one enough to admit the night’s heavy air.

Austen paused on the back porch, twelve-pack in hand, peering into the kitchen where there seemed to be a constant stream of drinkers, spillers, people with crushed empty cups. No one answered his knock, it was mostly for politeness’ sake anyway. Peter had offered to drive, but Austen had insisted on coming alone, pulling up late, hoping the party would be crowded enough to allow him as much anonymity as possible; it’s easy to hide in a roomful of drunks.

Inside he realized he did not remember what Mike Miguel looked like. So: Find Peter, moving slowly, smiling over his can of beer, warm sudsy taste. The last time he had drunk Budweiser, tried to drink it, was the accident day. Omens, omens. He did not believe in omens. Or luck, bad or good. Either you made your own luck or life made it for you.

Somebody changed the music, loud and homemade. Peter was sitting on the listing arm of a shit-brown recliner, smiling down at the cleavage of the woman in the chair. Austen crossed the room, mostly sideways, and tapped Peter on the shoulder with his beer can. The woman looked up.

"Hi,” she said. Her teeth were slightly brown, faint cocoa stain on the canines; what have you been eating, little girl? She was wearing a button

that said I TRIED TO GET IN TOUCH WITH MYSELF BUT I KEPT GETTING MY ANSWERING MACHINE.

"Did you have some of that seaweed? It's really good."

"Um, no."

Peter laughed; Austen saw he was already fairly drunk. "She means sea*food,* there was some crab or something in the kitchen. On crackers."

"Why don't you have that at your openings?" the woman said, diagonal lean to look up at Peter; Austen saw the fatty loll of her breasts, drank more beer and found the can empty; that was quick. "It's better than that crappy packing popcorn stuff you serve."

"But I *like* that crappy popcorn stuff." From chairside he picked up a bottle, dark wine again, a better class of label than the stuff he had brought over to Austen's. "Here," pouring for himself and the woman, then nudging Austen with the bottle. "You want some?"

"No," showing his beer can. "I think I'll get another one of these."

The kitchen was empty. He left his can on the sink, already crowded with glasses, crushed chip bags, plates in unsuccessful folds around what must have been the crab crackers, some thick pink paste like the plaster they use for dental impressions. The music went up a notch, harsh distortion. Somebody shrieked upstairs, there was a thump, laughter for a moment.

A woman came into the kitchen carrying an empty plate and paper cup. Very short hair, a shade of red unnatural; long thin legs and arms. Her earrings were as big and bright as Christmas bulbs. She took an imported beer from the overfull refrigerator. "Mike always has good beer," she said. She stuck her hand in the counter's disorder and miraculously came up with the opener. "Is there any more of that crab stuff left?"

"Uh, I don't know." Peering around, trying to look helpful. 'There might be some chips or something."

"You're Austen, aren't you," in a way that was no question, and she smiled. "I'm Gina Fisk."

"Oh, yeah, hi," putting out his hand. "Peter said you'd be here."

"Did he also say what a pest I've been?" Her grip was loose, wishy-washy, but she squeezed his fingers as she let them go. "I wanted to talk to you about your work. I remember you used to show at Peter's gallery."

"Yeah. A while ago."

'You don't anymore, though, do you?"

He shook his head, drank a little.

“Peter said you were sick.”

Thanks, asshole. “Well, yeah, but that’s not why I’m not showing.” Two subjects he didn’t want to talk about, what to do, but then people came in the kitchen, loud, arguing about how to make a particular drink. One guy kept saying, “No, you need *lime,”* over the shoulders of the others, and Gina motioned with her beer, Let’s go.

There was no place to sit but the stairs, amid the scatter of bent nails, paint flakes, an old issue of *New Art Examiner*. Gina sat down, plop, on what looked like a small pile of wood chips; she didn’t seem to notice or care, so Austen chose the step below her, sitting across the stairs until he very nearly hit his head on the banister —a long iron pipe held in precarious place by thick concrete nails more appropriate for crucifixion—then switched at once to her side. Looking up at her.

“Peter says,” pausing for a drink, “you were pretty ill.”

“Peter says a lot of things.”

“He says you were in the hospital.”

He could see her nipples through the pale T-shirt she wore, peaking shadows. When she spoke the Christmas-bulb earrings swung, a somewhat alarming trajectory; if she yelled or nodded hard they might hit somebody. Her left leg was leaning, very slightly, against his right arm.

“I got in an accident,” he said. "I don’t really like to talk about it.”

Her leg leaned more firmly against him. "Then we won’t.”

They talked, she talked mostly, he listened and drank. Her job, her classes, her ex-boyfriend who was now seeing another man. Hours, it must be very late now and he found himself drunk, very drunk, still on the stairs with a cluster of empty cans on the risers above and below him. He had a memory of talking to Peter, of some absurd kitchen debate between Peter and Gina, of trying to piss and being unable to close the bathroom door correctly. He had to piss again now. His ass felt numb and sore. Gina sat between his legs, her head resting heavy on his thigh; she was even drunker than he. One of her earrings was gone. He bent to say something to her and she reached with one arm to pull his head down, put her tongue in his mouth, a wriggling slippery thing like a little red fish.

"I have to go piss,” he said when his mouth was free.

"I’ll come with you.” She had a hard time standing up but once upright was more mobile than he. In the bathroom she insisted on unzipping him,

drawing out his cock; he pissed all over the floor, her hands no useful guide; he was starting to get hard.

"I have to pee too," she said, and skinned up her skirt; her panties were a strange fluorescent green, and he wondered at a color like that. Her pubic hair was very dark. As she pissed she reached for him, curled her hand around his cock and started stroking.

"Hey," leaning his head back, closed eyes, "not in here, okay?" The bathroom felt very hot, thick with smells, coy shampoo odor, sour mildew and wet. When he opened his eyes again she was starting to take off her T-shirt.

"Wait," he said, and someone knocked on the door, called through the crack. She pushed at the toilet handle, missed; in the anemic gurgling flush he managed to zip up again, help her pull her T-shirt down. There was a distinct and almost pleasant buzzing sensation behind both of his eyes.

She led him now through the kitchen, hot there too, people yelling; the music seemed exceptionally loud. Outside it was much better, cooler, quieter. There was a picnic table at the very back of the yard, the long bench seat half cracked like a long dangerous splinter. "Here," she said, and passed him a beer; he took a token sip. "No, this," and he felt the foiled square of a condom package.

"Look," she said, and though it was dark he tried: she was holding something in her hand, on her palm, some weird wrinkled ball; behold, she might have said, my liver! It was green. It was her panties. She put them on the table and reached for him, kissing him, pulling out his cock; his back was to the house and its lighted windows. Somehow she had taken back the condom, was putting it on him. And now she was straddling him, skirt around her hips and one skinny thigh on either side, holding his lolling head against her. He plucked at her T-shirt and obligingly she raised it up, did something to it to keep it out of the way; she had thick nipples, heavy as gumdrops, incongruent on her small breasts. Groaning now, making a whistling noise through her teeth, her breasts bumping against his face; he thought of her earrings, that same swing. She was still wearing one, and it bounced and shuddered as she did, as if it were an organic part of her and not something made of glass, or plastic, or

silver

and he was ready, he found, to come, in fact was going to, there in the dark, her hands tight on his shoulders and her sweaty tits in his face and as

he came he saw the earring brighten, fast jaunty sway and across its surface the slim and patent leer, pure silver, transmuting as she moved into something shaped like a human heart. It swung dangerous, almost against his face, almost touched his skin and he cried out, pushed awkward but her hold on him was strong, her legs fastened around him as if in the midst of cramp, and the shape changed again to something like a brain, spattered, crawling, rich with insects, nameless things with waving legs, the frothing bubble of silver blood and he was crawling too, away, clumsy in the grass with the condom dangling small and bloated on his shriveled dick, throwing up, throwing up, throwing up.

Somebody shaking him.

"Hey."

EMS?

No. Peter.

"Hey, asshole, get up," but gently, gentle too the arm that raised him. He was all wet on one side, piss or dew, hard to say. His right arm felt numb. He remembered little, still felt sick, a taste in his mouth like eating his own shit. Maybe he had. It was morning, or almost: he could see the house clearly, see cars still parked in the driveway. "Let's go inside, okay?" and as Peter walked him toward the house, half carrying him like a medic in a war movie, he saw in the shine of new sun the earring, lying serpent in the grass far beyond the picnic table; its surface was green, smeared with the lawn's reflection, but in the looking it changed, glossed immediate shine like the rainbow oil makes in a puddle, but silver, silver, and leering up at him in passing, no organ shapechange this time but a shock more subtle: the smile between friends.

The receptionist sounded as if she had a cold, or maybe it was just the phone. "You're not due for a checkup."

"I know," Austen said. The air conditioner in the T-shirt shop was broken, one of the windows too. There were two fat flies going slowly around the ceiling. Scratch, scratch, one nail against a sore spot on his knuckle. Scratch to blood.

"Are you having symptoms?"

The party. Drunk, he had been drunk, don't forget that. "Sort of. Yeah. I just want to see the doctor."

"Let me see what I have open.” Silence. Blood brown under his scratching nail. "I don’t have anything until a week from Thursday. This coming Thursday,” as if there might be some confusion. ‘That would be the twenty-eighth. Nine- fifteen.”

"Okay. My last name is Bandy,” spelling it, slowly, concluding the call and now as slowly another number, the insurance company. To find his premiums increased and the stern admonition against unnecessary office visits, unnecessary tests. This equipment costs money, and so does the technician’s time.

I know.

And driving home, hands dreary on the wheel and a thunderstorm coming, he had forgotten to recheck the patch job on the window, all the YUCK FOO T-shirts would get wet. Smell in the air like dust, too fine to see or even feel; summer was lasting forever. He found himself wanting autumn with a hard impatient illogic, as if somehow the change of seasons would change him, too, the passing of the sullen voluptuous heat into a cold to sterilize, to freeze, to clench in zero grip the mocking fluidity of silver running wet, like semen, like blood, like the tear-clear liquid that means death in the brain.

Since the party disaster—and no, he had not called Gina Fisk, had been too ashamed even to hear her voice—there had been no new shocks, no fresh manifestations; a clean and uneventful week but now Austen felt the beginnings of be- siegement, an over-the-shoulder mentality that had begun to expect, at all times, the worst. And more, things he could not imagine; how to prepare for the unbelievable? By admitting belief in what your eyes tell you, by the grope and shock of the fear that you feel? And is it better or worse, safer or more dangerous, lighter or dark? Crazy or not? He was getting sick of the question, sick of questioning himself at every turn.

In the backseat of his car, lying solemn against the jiggling empty soda cans and the faintly doggy slouch of an old armless windbreaker was his stock of ammunition; if knowledge could be power. Books with titles like *Coping with Neurologic Problems, Essentials of the Brain, Brain Power.* Nursing manuals, dumb gossipy layperson accounts, My Sick Head juxtaposed with texts so technical, even the indexes were beyond him; still, he read them, all of them, in no order, learned much but all ajumble: aphonia, aphemia, aphasia, ataxia, apraxia, like the names of Greek goddesses, a roll call of the queens of disease, keepers of the brain, Nyx and

Nox and the region of night. He read of meningitis and MS, of intracranial pressure, of Guillain-Barre, of epilepsy; obsessively of those who had sustained brain injury, of temporal-lobe seizure patients. Everything he could find, library, bookstore; he had requested a reading list from Stella's office, and got it, along with some unspoken opinions that let him know some people thought he was taking his illness much too personally. No one had actually come out and said hypochondria but it was probably on his horizon, one or two office visits, one or two negative test results down the line.

Turning into his driveway and the first jut of lightning, quick strike off to the near west; he hurried inside, books in arm, to shut the kitchen windows. One dumb determined fly pressed itself against the screen door: I want out, I want out, I want out. He opened the screen—go on, idiot—but the fly kept crawling, up and down, bumbling deliberation until he brushed it lightly with his fingers: Go. And it went. And promptly in again.

"Right," smiling, brushed it out more strongly to make sure that it was truly free. Kinship with a grown-up maggot. How low can you get. There was beer in the refrigerator but he chose water instead, cold water shot and slivered with the cracks of ice left in the bottom of the ice-keeper. The storm was taking its time, arrival close but not closer, dull ponderous farts of thunder before the grand explosion. He took his water and went to sit on the front lawn.

The grass was sharper than ever, little spikes against his weary thighs. Too dry. Well, the storm would take care of that. He drank, the water cold to pain. Sweat on his forehead; hotter, now, as if the storm needed a certain temperature to break and if nature would not accommodate, it would fashion its own. There was in the clouds a tilt, suggestive for some reason of the fugue before a seizure, a certain distortion common to that borderline between pained prosaic consciousness and the ether-state of scales and smells and fear, the land where the silver thing lived. If it lived.

Don't start.

And the depression, again, the idea of difference forever ingrained, fear so he felt its jelly quiver at odd dry moments, self-disgust over his behavior at the party, the way he might likely behave, at any time; and all of it a poor mingle with the overpowering fact of belief, or its opposite: to accept the doctors' verdicts of recovery was to accept madness. But if not, what?

And above him the slow-growing mutter of an enormous stroke, lightning building like God's generator, the first hot drops and up, quick, empty glass in hand as he crossed the grass, head down and hurry, hurry, before he looked to see in the lightning the unmistakable sizzle of silver.

"What kind of symptoms are you having, exactly?"

Stella in the morning, bad morning, not particularly happy with him and not particularly careful to hide it, ticcing away, reading through his file like a novel he had not enjoyed the first time. He had on a red sweatshirt under his white doctor coat; for some reason it felt important to read the lettering.

"Your last tests," Stella said, tapping at the file.

"I know."

Are you going to tell? he asked himself. How? Imagine: Hey, Dr. Stella, guess what? I keep seeing the damnedest thing, dunno if it's hallucinations or not, but it's pretty fucking wacky. Right.

Stella folded his arms. The white coat swung, tantalizing over the lettering, less white, faded maybe from lots of washings. Who does your laundry, Doctor?

"Why are you here?"

Well. He could be blunt too. "I'm still not better."

"All these tests say differently."

'Then the tests are wrong."

'There are other factors. Have you been taking your medication?"

Austen nodded.

"Regularly?"

Nod again. Stella's tic seemed to worsen; maybe it was because he was pissed off. "Alcohol can reduce the medication's effectiveness," sounding just like one of the backseat books. "Are you having headaches? Dizziness? Blurred or double vision? Any other vision problems?"

"No."

"Austen, let me tell you something." Putting down the file; uh-oh, time for The Talk. 'Tegretol is a very effective medication, if taken the way it's prescribed. If you're using the medication correctly, and you're not experiencing seizures, or any other suggestive symptoms, *and* all your tests come back normal, then . . ."

A pause. Was it customary to take a deep breath before announcing your patient is a card-carrying attention-craving hypochondriac? Was it

customary for the patient too? The silence was starting to get embarrassing. Go on, Austen thought, deliberately refusing to pick at his knuckle sore, no tics for him. Tell me it's all in my head.

'Then," another breath, "I have to repeat, again, that nothing is wrong with you. You had a serious head injury, you experienced trauma, you experienced seizures, and it's all over."

Austen said nothing. Someone laughed in the hallway. The air conditioner clicked back on.

"Austen, maybe you need to get some counseling."

That night he dreamed repeatedly of Emily: the drift of her hair, firm fingers in his, the long rare grin; and woke sweating, sheets twisted tight and fettering around his legs as if by some clever hands. He wanted to cry. He wanted to call her. He wanted so much to call her and say, I need help. Will you come?

Instead he tugged off the sheets, went to the bathroom, pissed, drank water. No midnight stares in the mirror, please. Back to bed and he thought he would lie awake but instead slept again at once, thick poleaxed slumber, dreamed of Emily standing in his front yard with a toolbox.

What are you doing? he asked her. What's that?

It's a toolbox, Austen. The same dry half-smile. God, was she beautiful. She was wearing a T-shirt and no bra, old black jeans. By the way, she said, why'd you fuck that woman?

Absurd, what woman? But somehow he had those stupid green panties right there in his hands, balled up and she reached, casual, to take them from him, shake them out with an air of incompetence confirmed, as if she'd caught him driving with no oil in his car.

You'd better be careful, she said.

Landscape of storm, behind her, the sudden summer kind. Rain on the sidewalk, dark spots against the baked gray concrete. He began to argue with her to come inside, it was stupid to stand out in the rain, she was holding a metal toolbox, for God's sake.

Her hair blew backward; the wind was rising. Oh, stop worrying, she said. Besides—with that other grin, her mean one—it's just a brainstorm, isn't it?

Isn't it?

And waking, crying, an erection, garotting sheets again and the phone, ringing. Ringing.

"Hello?" through tears, trying to sit up. Sweat all over his body.

A voice, thickened, she sounded drunk: Gina Fisk. Behind her the noise of a party or bar.

"You shit," she said.

Slowly he put the receiver down. The phone did not ring again.

She was right, of course.

Workday. Forty hours a week now, his last puny gain negated by the latest bill from Stella. Peter stopped by the store to tell him he was working too hard.

"Stop thinking so much," perched on the counter, incongruous swing of his legs; Peter was not the swinging-leg type, especially now in his gallery director's outfit, black linen pants and blue shirt fashionably creased. "You know what you ought to do?"

"No, but you do."

"Ha ha. Fact is I *do* know." Austen, back turned to take up a slim stack of invoices, lucky they had gotten that soccer team order, it was pretty much paying his wage this week. And what if the orders shrank smaller still?

"You need to stop thinking so much. Go out more."

"Yeah," stamping the first of the invoices, Rorschach smudge on the side of his hand. "Like that party."

"So you got drunk, so what." This did not quite come off; they both knew it. "All right, you don't feel up to partying, no problem. There're lots of other things to do besides sitting at home alone in the dark."

"Peter, I make it a point to turn the lights on."

Peter touched him, very lightly, one warm hand on his shoulder; Peter's hands were unusually small, he had never noticed that before. Small, and hard at the palms.

"Austen," with a gravity evidenced by the smileless cadence of the words, Peter was always a smiler, "listen to me. I'm your friend, and I can say stuff like this."

"Like what?"

"Like you look like shit. You must've lost twenty pounds and believe me, you can't afford it. You can't afford your doctor bills, either, but you

keep on going anyway. Why?”

Austen did not answer, but did not look away. Tell Peter? It would be its own relief, to talk about it, even a little; find perhaps not explanation but a kind of tardy sense; something. There was a silence in which he might have spoken, launched the first words, irretrievable.

But Peter went on. "You look sick, you act sick, you don’t want to go out. You know what I think? I think you need to work, and I don’t mean,” waving one dismissive arm to take in the crudity of the signs and the shirts, the crusty linoleum, the burglar bars on the windows, "this shit either. You need to do your art, man.” Austen did not speak. Peter’s hand was still on his shoulder, and now squeezed, a little, shook him gently back and forth.

"So why don’t you work? It can’t still be because of Emily.”

Austen shrugged; it was embarrassing, somehow, to be seen as one who carries a torch, who can’t let go. Blind devotion. Stupid. He wished a customer would come in, wished Peter would just stop.

"Point by point," hands now spread before him, honest fingers, "I loved Em. But you can’t let her going kill your art, man. Nobody’s worth that.”

His shrug, again and handy. Emily had done nothing to damage him; he did not need to argue that point, with Peter or anyone. Even himself. Even Emily.

"You haven’t done anything in, what? A year? Since the Sphinx series, right?"

"Right." *Criosphinx*, *Androsphinx*, *Hierosphinx;* the ram, the human, the hawk. Nobody had liked them.

"Look.” Hands now flat on the counter; time to deal. If he had seen Peter use that gesture once, he had seen it a million times, and now he almost smiled; he knew what was coming. “Do one for me. All right? I’ll pay you for it like anybody else, just do one.”

He had to smile now, shook his head, not in refusal. "Right. Of who?”

"I don’t know,” smiling back, "anyone you want. Yourself. Emily. Anybody.”

"I’ll think about it.”

And he did: sitting out the last few hours, the shop empty, only three calls; driving home, fixing dinner—microwave chicken, some frozen biscuits from the back of the freezer—thought hard enough to go upstairs, take the plastic off the easel—a glorified drafting table, but it had always done its job. He had not done some grand sign-off, good-bye forever; things

were still in their places, kept carefully, he could not afford in any sense to waste supplies. Most of his brushes were camel's hair, their handles smooth dark stems. One year for Christmas Emily had bought him expensive brushes, a vast expense, they were living off her unemployment compensation that winter. Love's extravagance, and she had been astonished to anger when he returned them, cold at the kitchen table when he came back. Snow on his coat. Scared to look at her.

"Emily."

She had not turned, would not. He remembered the long arch of her backbone, she sat like a soldier.

"This better not be some O. Henry shit," she had said, and he had hurried to deny, no, I just bought groceries, put some gas in the car. Her anger had always frightened him a little, unnerved him, there was potential there: like standing before some iron door, without feature, faintly warm to the touch; what would happen if you opened it too far? Well, he had found out, hadn't he. But that night at least they had reconciled, made love in their cold bedroom, the furnace turned low to save money; she had fallen asleep with the covers over her head.

Last Christmas, drunk with melancholy, he had called her, sitting winding the cord like a teenager; she had not been home, had never returned his call. This year maybe a hospital would do it for him. —Oh, stop it.

He sat in the folding chair before the easel, its irregular canvas square, sat there for almost half an hour, doing nothing, simply looking. Then he put the plastic back on and went downstairs.

Before bed, mouth faintly ringed with toothpaste, staring into the mirror: Peter had said he looked like shit. Did he? Looking at himself, really looking, not like when he shaved. Dark a little under the eyes, so what. Cheekbones harder, more gray in his hair, he needed a haircut pretty bad. Who cares. Gina Fisk had seemed to like his looks, but then again he didn't want to think about Gina ever, if possible. He turned on the radio, loud so he wouldn't have to, found himself instead thinking of Emily, of doing her portrait; even Peter could be right sometimes. He had enough photographs of her to consult, if consultation was what he needed. He took them out, well-used manila envelope, flipped through them, flipped slower, half-painful slump at his half-assed desk: Emily poker-faced in an ugly red ski hat, Emily with her girlfriend, what? Sara? Sharon? Emily eating,

somebody’s kitchen. Emily on a beach, one hand shading her eyes. Emily at Christmas. Emily in a very thin T-shirt, he could nearly see through it, definitely saw the sweet slope, endlessly remembered, of breasts and ribs. If he tilted the picture, looked just so, he could pretend to see them, memory’s eyes, their weight, the softness of the skin beneath. Little nipples in his mouth, gentle, so gently sawing teeth back and forth, barely grazing, she would put her hands to either side of his head and that little whuff, whuff of sound, as if she was breathless, as if pleasure made it hard to breathe.

Useless, oh, but he remembered, felt the sorry rush of arousal, worked himself to come, fast, get it over with, sat tired, tired, too tired to get up but he did. Get up to go to bed.

And slept to dream, thick scars like rivets on forehead and back, he saw himself lying nearly naked on a road that led to his mother’s house, a house he had not visited, a place he knew only from address, lying with his eyes wide open and a clear and constant stream of liquid from his nose and ears, syrup on the blacktop, washing pink, a risky freshening red until it all ran black and across the road like some tremendous shadow came the elongated slouch, exaggerated hunch and dance burlesque of silver, immemorial, come to take what it needed, what it wanted to have; to usher in an era of blood.

And: woke, to find each individual window, each daunted square coated like paint with silver, living ripple, the squelch and shine like the sounds of breathing tissue and Austen screamed, sat up in bed and screamed like a child with night terrors, but nobody heard, and nobody came.

3

GILLESPIE, Yellow Pages, it should be an AMA directory but you work with what you have. GILLMORE; GILMON. Neurologists apparently saw little need to advertise, maybe business was busting out all over. Like a frisky hematoma. There was a neurology clinic in Trenton, almost forty miles one way; he would have to take time off; he could not afford time off.
The kitchen was cool,
the coolest it had been in days; summer was ending, finally, swinging toward autumn and the earlier dark. Austen reached for the coffeemaker, nudged the pot aside to hold his cup beneath the new brewing drip. It burned his mouth a little, hurt on the jutting sore spot inside his cheek, bitten hard in last night's, what? Last night's what.
He checked the number again before he dialed. The soonest they could see him, Mr. Bandy of the mysterious recurring headaches, was two and a half weeks from now. At four p.m.

* * *

At work, a surprise.

The store owner, a man with a face as mournfully ordinary as a commercial for aspirin, was waiting for Austen when he came in, standing awkward behind the counter as if Austen was the owner, he the employee. He waved a small handful of paper, presumably orders, by way of greeting, tapped them against the countertop.

"Looks like a bad quarter," he said.

Things went downhill from there, Austen waiting silent to hear that the shop was going to be closed Mondays till further notice, which was a polite way of saying forever.

"So no more overtime, right," irony unnoticed, as the owner shook his hand, told him to keep it up (What? The good work? His pecker?) and fled as if unconsciously traumatized by the squalor of his shop. It was nearly an hour later before the phone rang, a woman asking for matching T-shirts and keychains for her bowling team: "I heard you were really cheap," she said, through what sounded like a mouthful of snot.

"Uh-huh," Austen said. His pen scratched empty across the order form. "We're cheap all right."

Streets with trees already dying, leaves helpless on the branches ropy with some arboreal disease. He had left work at three-thirty, gambling the owner would not make one of his in frequent calls, drove (still illegally; he had nearly three months left to go) a steady twenty over until he got close enough to start squinting at addresses. He had not dressed correctly for the new weather, he was shivering in T-shirt and jeans by the time he got inside the clinic. Office. Whatever it was, yellow-gray brick, the ugliest collection of waiting room art he had truthfully ever seen. Trying to read a copy of *Time* in which he had no interest, People, Medicine, the Arts. There was a guy in New Jersey who had seemingly captured the imagination of most of New York's major galleries by his new micropointillist technique. He was skinny and jolly- looking, why shouldn't he be jolly. Wonder if he ever did portraits.

"Mr. Bandy?"

Past the fake walnut door into a hallway paneled in the same, an examination room with two bad black-and-white photographs framed in red on opposing walls. The nurse weighed him, took his vitals, got slightly pissed when Austen asked what they were.

"Why don't you discuss it with the doctor?" he said.

Austen smiled, small and phony. "Well, I'd like to see for myself." Asshole. BP was up, he saw; heart rate up a little too. Nerves. Are you under any unusual stress, Mr. Bandy?

It took about twenty minutes before the doctor came in. She was very thin, almost emaciated, very blond. She had teeth like a kid's, big, square, crooked; very white, as white as her coat.

"Austen," she said. 'That's an uncommon name."

Another phony smile. Waiting for her to get on with it.

"So you're having headaches," she said. She hadn't looked more than once at the chart. "Severe?"

"Bad enough," nodding; his hands were shaking a little. Nervous?

"Any vision problems? Double vision, blurriness? Do you experience nausea, flushing, or sweating?" and so on, but he was a little too rote, a little too quick on the draw; he saw that in her face. He tried to slow down for the physical exam, tried to cooperate, look left, look right, where am I touching you now? Does this hurt? When she had finished she said, "You've been through the routine before, haven't you?"

Make the face that Emily hated, the one she called his innocuous face. "I just want my headaches to go away."

He was not much of an actor, but maybe that wouldn't end up mattering. "I'm going to schedule you for some tests," she said. "Do you have insurance?"

No. "Yes."

"Schuyler Hospital," she said; another good forty minutes. "Do you know where that is?"

Outside the temperature had dropped again; Austen turned the heat on in the car, full blast, dry air. He was still cold. Had the doctor known to what extent he was untruthful, had she cared, really, much at all? He was certainly not one of your long-winded hypochondriacs, was he, just a quiet, miserable man who presented with headaches, whose blood pressure was somewhat elevated, who had lost too much weight; lost too much in general. What would she say when she saw the scar tissue in his head? And what would he say back?

Don't think about it now.

And on the radio, stupid, a song sentimental to no one but him, tears in his eyes as he drove, the traffic growing heavier, the temperature still going down, mercury falling. Silver.

Schuyler was a new hospital, all red and blue graphics, painted lines on the floor to keep you from becoming more lost than you were; it had besides the usual hospital odor of medicated decay a fresh new stink, some flavored disinfectant that stuck solid in Austen's throat, lay on his tongue like an unmeltable lozenge. Even the technician giving him his MRI admitted to being grossed out.

"I don't know where they got it," she said, spare raisin face curled in a frown, busy and brisk, "but I bet they got it cheap. See, with this test," her hands so warm, brown as little cookies, little muffins, all those motherly

bakerly memories that he did not have, "it’s important that you don’t move at all, nothing, not even your head. So lie real still, okay?"

"Okay." To her he gave his real smile, rarer than ever these days; lay as still as he was able inside the eclair-shaped machine, wondered as he lay if his closed-eye thoughts could change the image, bitter or serene, the slow anxious dribble of worry or the prickly squirt of terror, reflected like ink in water, maybe, like blood in an empty glass. All around him sick people, dying people, this hospital had six floors and with the exception (not always) of maternity, there was misery everywhere. And for the ones who were dying, misery incurable.

Except by a step across a line, across the border.

Twenty minutes and the test was over; the technician told him he did well. "Real well,” writing, not looking at him. "Just like a veteran.”

‘Thanks,” awkward, awkward too his exit, somehow he wanted to say more. Outside it took him almost five minutes to find his car; at the gate he found it cost much more than he had expected just to park.

Rain, his wipers inadequate, spattering gusts against the windows. A woman in a brand-new white Toyota cut him off, swerving jaunty and heedless through a just-changed traffic light and he screamed at her, simultaneous slam of brakes and horn, screamed and then wondered at his own overreaction, she was just a stupid bitch, what difference did it make? Huh? And knew that he felt like screaming again. And harder. And louder.

I don’t want to be sick. I don’t *want* to be *sick.*

At home the house was very cold; apparently he had forgotten to turn the furnace up. Shuffling through the house, still in his coat; he had no messages; all the mail was bills. He made a pot of coffee and took a cup upstairs, to sit before the plastic shroud of his easel, to sit and not to think.

A long empty day at work, Peter importunate on the phone; no one else called but a wrong number and a woman looking for a costumer. When he got home, there was a message: Dr. Gilmon’s office had called, to tell him they needed to speak to him regarding his insurance company, and that his test results were negative.

4

Consider Tegretol.

Shield against the terrors, relief, a panacea he could hold in his hand.

Twelve hundred milligrams of insulation against the naked electrical thrust of his permanently disabled brain.

Today he would not take his pills.

Lying in bed, back cramped, left arm bent awkward and asleep beneath his head: a rare day off: time to experiment. Outside his ratty red blankets the bedroom was cold. Fast into the bathroom, toes cringing against the heavy green porcelain tile. Biblical patterns, the original mosaic, he remembered pointing it out to Emily when they bought the house. Look, honey, on the floor: art. She was unimpressed; not unusual.

His pills, there on the sink, little orange container from the pharmacy. His first name misspelled. He brushed his teeth, foam and bloody dew, his gums were sore. Last night he had woken from a dream, nightmare in which his teeth were huge, distended; giant things not only extending far from his mouth but also flexing as if jointed, bending in and out like the careless jaws of a construction implement, something that chews the ground, and all of it beyond his will or control.

Struggling, and in the waking, his hands at his mouth, touch reflexive and in the touching something strange, something wrong and he pulled his hands away, heart hard and scared to turn the light on, to see blood.

But instead he saw silver.

All over. Spatters and clots, fresh, as if he had vomited it up, on his face, his hands, his chest, on the pillow and sheets and he groaned, gagging, oh God it's in my *mouth* and ran to the bathroom, spitting, spitting hard into the sink. Even with the hot water on full-blast it took a long, stubborn time to run down. And in the midnight mirror, every time he looked away, a

skitter, a titter, a drip and trace, do you see it? Now? How about now? You're not trying hard enough.

Back to bed, sleeping atop the coverlet with the bedside light on, waking, in a panic, an hour later: light still on, the bed dry, unstained. Did that even *happen*? Any of it?

So this morning, Tegretol-free. You want out, then come out. Staring past himself in the mirror, washing his face, hard. Extra hard. Is it the kind of thing that washes off?

The radio on, loud, it was going to be shit-eating cold for the next week, no letup; no glossy brochure autumn, no crispy leaves, no tang. Sullen and wet, the skies, what, silver? That made him smile, a little, sour, the joke's on you.

Making breakfast, toaster waffles, embedded blueberries luxurious as a rash. Beneath *Criosphinx,* eating and reading the paper and one eye nervous, what exactly did he expect to happen? Instant madness? The top of his head to shoot toward the ceiling? He had been cautioned strongly against the very thing he was doing, but in how many ways did that actually matter? According to them there was nothing wrong with him anyway.

He waited, hanging around after breakfast, nervous doing nothing until he realized there weren't going to be any duke-it-out manifestations, if worse came to worst he would more than likely flop unconscious like a frog on the kitchen floor and notice nothing at all amiss until the paramedics showed up to stuff him into a bag. So: work, there was a lot of stuff to do, long put off: the gutters, choking on dead leaves, the pile of summer tools to be cleaned and put away. The house had no garage, just a small toolshed with sliding doors so rusty that they could no longer be moved more than a foot or two in either direction. Outside, hose coiled neat and constricting on one arm, he struggled, trying to push the door with his other arm and leg, harder. Harder. *Shit.* Real strain now, come on, flabby, you can do it and it rattled free, an inch. Maybe two.

Again, harder, and it gave, a good extra foot and he was happy, it was sort of pitiful to be happy over something like that but he was. Cold, bare hands out of pocket now to clean the hedge clippers, wiping the blades, he never used them much anymore. Once he had chased Peter down the driveway with them, hollering about some dumb show at the gallery, Emily on the porch with a beer yelling Cut off his dick.

Must everything be a shrine to her?

Yes.

The hose had its own spot, some plastic hooks to keep it off the cracked slab, whoever had poured that had not known what they were doing. The lawn mower was already inside, flat scabs of dried grass still stuck to the marred red shine of its surface; rake, shovel, snow shovel with its warped handle, old garbage can with the bottom rotted to near filigree, he had been saving it for something. Some leaves had blown in, twisted tricky shapes against the concrete, against the rust-dappled walls of the shed itself. Rain like snow on his neck, blowing damp across his face when the wind shifted. There used to be some gardening gloves somewhere. Maybe Emily had thrown them out.

Tired head against the door, resting a little, just a little. What if he were to call her and say, just say, Hi. How are you. I am fine. I am really scared, Emily, nobody seems to want to tell me what I know is true: I'm sick. I'm sick and I'm not getting any better, in fact I think I might be getting worse. I'm taking these pills only now I'm not taking them because I have to do something. Because something has to be done.

He couldn't find the gardening gloves. His hands, stiff to uselessness, struggling to close the shed doors back again and in a burst of petty temper kicked them, hard, they rattled like empty cans and he left them open, let everything rot, who gives a shit. Back into the house, empty house, empty easel, sit in the fucking dark.

And fell asleep there, cramped before the easel and woke shivering to piss, get some water, something to eat. Handfuls of cereal out of the box. He was really tired, *really* tired, maybe that had something to do with stopping the pills. On the couch, thinking vaguely of staying up, trying to read, last week's newspaper still in rectangles untouched. The whole house looked untended, ghost house; don't say it.

Back to sleep, on the couch, curled in an awkward fetal slump, hands pillowed beneath his cheek. Darkness in the house, dark kitchen and bathroom, dark stairway. Dark at both the doors. And across every flat surface, cabinet doors and kitchen floor, squat appliance cubes and mirror in the bathroom, walls and every window in the house the skitter and dash of silver, fast, almost playful. Patternlike, ovals, half circles like crescents. Like sickles. Like smiles.

And in his dreams a seep like gentle poison; suffocation; everywhere, waking him at last with not a scream but silence, muscles stiff as if shocked

all over, sweating. Scared. Scared. Loose-mouthed into the bathroom, wet all over his face, it hurt and he turned on the light to see blood, blood all over his face, his chin, like a gluttonous eater, like a gorging slob. Cautious in pain he extended his tongue, saw the gash, big one. He had read about that, people biting their own tongues during a seizure, one guy had bitten his completely in two. So he must have had a seizure, lying there thinking he was dreaming, had one and didn't know it.

Like a clown, there, in the mirror, hair peaked and flat in places, white face, mouth hangdog open and sticky with fun.

It was a little too early to take his evening dose, but he took it anyway. Too exhausted to be shamefaced. Swallowing blood.

This time, no neurologist: Dr. Holly was a big fat GP who smelled vaguely of cigarettes and had a comfortable sprinkling of acne scars on both cheeks, his office a mere ten minutes' drive from work. He charged proportionately, too.

"Bit your tongue, eh?"

Nodding, thick mumble, his lower lip was swollen some: "Fell on the ice." It was easier, somehow, to lie to him; medical snobbery? GPs a little lower on the food chain than neurologists? Don't forget, you were delivered by a horse doctor: one of his mother's sayings, and what would she make of all this? Better never to know.

"The nurse says you have headaches."

Immediate nod. Austen put his hands in the pockets of his coat, felt the twist of a desiccated nose tissue, the paper scrap telling Dr. Holly's address. No two-week wait here, Dr. Holly had found a spot for him the very next day. God bless you, Dr. Holly.

Sewing the tear in his tongue, big puffy hands very deft and dry. The taste of rubber faint in Austen's mouth. "For pain, you can just take aspirin, but you're going to need something for infection; it's pretty sore in there. Are you taking any other medications?"

Slow nod. "Tegretol." He had to say it twice, hated the look he got in return.

"Epilepsy?" asked Dr. Holly, stripping off his gloves. He looked like he might lean back and light a cigarette.

"No." It was easiest of all to lie while writing; on a notepad that said SQUIBB on the bottom: an accident. A seizure. Headaches ever since.

"You must've seen a neurologist."

Nodding, trying to convey with a shrug that he was less than impressed with the treatment received. His tongue was beginning to hurt again, the shot was wearing off. It had hurt like a bastard last night, kept him awake, wall-eyed search for silver. Nothing had happened, which meant nothing at all. Maybe next time he could bite out his own throat.

"Sometimes post-traumatic symptoms can linger for quite a while." Prescription pad in hand. "I really think you ought to consult a neurologist. If you're dissatisfied with the care you got, the nurse at the desk can give you a referral to several doctors. I can recommend all of them very highly."

Thanks.

The drive back to work was slow, ice everywhere, his alibi twice in one day. Apparently the weather had skipped fall altogether and gone straight into winter; all last night's rain was spread slick across pavement, streets, hard puddles. When the cool sun touched them they shone a faint pewter, dull shine stripped of menace, just water and hard.

Speech so thick he had to turn on the answering machine at work, which hardly mattered, there were so few calls. Who wants T-shirts in the winter? Of course last year they had had a special Christmas promotion, Wear Your Photo with Santa, it was amazing the brutality descended on children in the name of tradition. They would probably do it again this year; people had seemed to like it. People were in the main incomprehensible.

Back home after an empty day, on the couch with his brain books. This one was written by a neurologist, not much of a writer actually but pretty compelling anyway, this particular chapter was about a woman with temporal-lobe seizures just like his, except of course for the silver part. They had her on Tegretol and Mysoline but she was still seizing up.

"Jan faced me squarely. 'Doctor,' she said, 'when am I going to get better?'

"What could I tell her? What reply could I possibly make? Medicine is a science, but like all sciences, it has both mysteries and limits.

" 'Jan, ' I said gravely, 'I just don't know. ' "

Hey Jan, Austen thought, I'm with you.

Next they took her off Tegretol *and* Mysoline, and were now trying Luminal, which since the chapter had only two pages to go was probably going to be her happy ending. That was one of the pains in the ass about these books: every story had an ending. Accidents, strokes, diseases, even

unhappy endings but always some resolution. Like the guy in the last chapter, Ronald, who had died of five separate malignant tumors, four of them in his brain. He had had seizures, too, but at that point had more than likely given up noticing little things like that. Count your blessings. Something else his mother used to say. Why was he thinking about her so often lately? Emily he could understand, but not his mother. I'm sick, I want my mommy. Cyndee. God. Like a doll, or one of those weird bobbing figures people put on their lawns for Christmas: all the right motions, smiles, nods and blinks but blank inside. He remembered her visiting someone in the hospital, a girlfriend or something, no baby-sitter and dragging him along; he must've been seven or eight. Cyndee perched on the side of the bed, legs crossed, a beige pantsuit stitched in blue. She had brought a fruit basket, thick yellow cellophane and a red ribbon. The whole room smelled. Cross and bored, playing with the blinds, trying to snap them incrementally, slat by slow slat. *Thunk thunk thunk.* Outside he could see traffic, a grocery store across the street, dirty snow in withering piles.

And Cyndee's patter, not so much fast as endless, on and on like a nonsense machine that you couldn't shut off. Every medical horror story she had ever heard, from sources unimaginable: TV and magazines and the people in the elevator coming up, warm regurgitation, who knows what her friend had thought but it had made even him feel sick. They left when it was time for the friend's shot, or therapy, or something. Holding his hand. Hers was always too warm.

"That poor woman," she said.

He had not answered, pretending to push all the buttons on the elevator. One, two, three.

Basement. Was that where they kept the dead people? He had never seen anyone dead but his Grampy and that didn't count, Grampy had had on a shitload of makeup at the time and looked completely unlike himself, completely unlike anybody human. Like at the zoo, when they made the monkeys wear kid suits.

"She's going to die," Cyndee said, with the air of someone who was always being proved right. "It's just a shame."

"Where'll they take her?"

Cyndee stared at him, round eyes, her eye makeup clumped into little half circles. A blue on her lids resembling no known color. 'What are you talking about?"

“You know.” Turned half away, sullen, now, with embarrassment, he had not expected her to react, half the time she never heard what he said or answered if she did. ‘When she’s—when people die. Where do they take ’em?”

‘What an awful question." Was she really upset? She looked upset. Why was it such an awful question? Dragging him now by one wrist, through the blacktop rectangle of the parking lot, he tried to yank free but she held him harder till it really hurt and he gave up.

On the ride home he blew clouds on the window, rubbed his fingertip to make words, circles, little pictures of cats and trees and cars. Cyndee drove like a bird runs across ice, both hands on the wheel, pink gloves with foamy pompons at the wrists. She did not speak to him except in orders—put on your pajamas, no more TV, shut off that light—for the rest of the day. Maybe, smiling now, a dry smile, that was the last actual conversation he had ever tried to have with her. Well, he wouldn’t be having any more.

He had turned up the heat, tonight he was sick of freezing. The aspirins had shaved the edge off the pain, a dull roar, but the combination, maybe, of aspirin and the antibiotic or whatever the infection pill was, plus the Tegretol—my, hadn’t that experiment lasted long—made him feel stupid, or perhaps just stupider than normal. He kept reading his brain book, read through where Jan and her Luminal went home to a happy and productive ending, skipped far enough into the next chapter to see that it was about Louis, diagnosed as having Huntington’s, which was just a little too much for a quiet evening at home.

Walking to the kitchen, past time for something to eat and he glanced at the answering machine: Peter had left him a message, unreturned; the light was still blinking, blind small eye. Austen knew what it was about: the portrait. Are you working on it? Peter would ask. Are you thinking of working on it? No, and no. I took the plastic off the easel, though, the other day; how ’bout that?

The idea of working made him not tired but exhausted, he did not want to feel a brush in his hands, he did not want to think about the way the paint would stick and smear across the canvas, did not want to consider the result; failure, yes, he was almost certain of that and it was not that which frightened him, gave him an almost queasy sense of unease: it was *how* he would fail, in what aspects. None of them technical— without hubris he knew he was technically very very good, he had not been working all these

years for nothing—but in a spot far deeper, more deeply damaging in its absence; he was missing, he thought, what drove him, he was empty. Empty. Emily leaving had not been the reason, as Peter believed, nor even the catalyst as he himself had once obliquely considered. Perhaps it was the lack itself, imperfectly perceived, that had driven Emily away, had brought doubly upon him the despair of emptiness and the banal certainty of despair avoided, how fear the void when the void is where you live?

Standing in the kitchen, almost like coming to, a spoon in his hand; are you having another seizure? No. Just forgetful. Not paying attention. Now: tomato soup, water, supermarket basil, make a piece of garlic toast to float like croutons. Emily used to say he was at his best with the cheapest foods, no-brand soups and hamburger on sale; it was true, he could make much from nothing, or used to. It was pretty good, too, when it was done: even the tin taste of the can was gone. The soup made him feel warm inside, nourished; he put his hands to either side of the bowl, gentle absorption. Back to the stove for more and, stirring, a little skin had formed and gently he pulled at it with the spoon, it was thicker than it looked, it clung unpleasant as a scab and scraping it back he saw beneath it the shock of a layer grotesque, like ganglia exposed: silver scum adrift and scuttling around the spoon, bugs under rocks and sluggish bubbles like boiling fat exploding sullen silver and it splashed on his hand, he threw the spoon away from him, the background clatter of its landing subsumed by his own sounds, “Fuck fuck fuck” like a dog barking crazy to get away, tearing, tearing, tearing at its own flesh, its own legs to escape.

“Fuck!" Screaming it, he knocked the pan over, burned his wrist and the quenched smell of gas without fire, the soup consumed and all pure silver, seeping down the sides of the burner, the sides of the stove and now turned from the simple terror of ooze to crawling fingers and resolving itself into *hands, huge* hands, gripped to either side of the stove as if they might with one capricious motion rip it free of the floor, send its slim stiff hoses spewing gas like snakes cut to pieces, then *turn*

on him

and behind the stove, skating on the faintly greasy wall, the formation like frost immediate, quicksilver time lapse speed into nonface, that same oblique hospital grin but *big,* oh God it was so big.

Showing itself.

And he screamed again, no words; all noise; noise like someone dying, like live brain tissue ripped gloating and free and he kept screaming, ah ah ah like a victim waiting for shock to come and knock him out.

Screamed and screamed, until he stopped.

Sitting at the kitchen table, mouth half open, breathing slower now. Red soup not bloodlike but lumpy, thick, cooled into the shapes not of tumors but of what lies inside them. The pan still on the floor where he had knocked it. No silver anywhere. On his wrist a deep scorch, crying at the kitchen table. He cried without hope; because he was hopeless. He cried because there was no one to cry with, no one to turn to and say Did you see that? Did you ever see anything like that?

I am so tired of seeing it.

I am so tired of being sick.

I am so afraid of being crazy.

And sat there still, imagining he slept or maybe did, nodding no but swirling head instead, boneless drop over into the country not of dreams or even nightmares, a drop momentous over borders unseen: into the large dark country of the mad. And imagining in his incremental travels, slow shuffling walk and the high stare of wonderment, what it might be like if what he craved was merely simple access, insanity's ancient frontier: allure, the harpy's promise: to see the unknown sights, to *know;* the promise to grant not only sight but insight, to open the doors within, to show with the blinkless pitiless stare of the absolute what absolutely is.

Waking, *"Hunh!"* scared, flopping in his chair. His mouth was open, the burn on his wrist an outrageous pain. It was past time for his medicine. He was afraid to leave the kitchen. He was afraid to look in a mirror. Aren't all mirrors backed with silver?

Instead he wrote to Emily. A drying blue felt-tip pen, careful not to lean his hurting wrist against the tabletop, a carefully folded sheet the back of which boasted CHEAPIZZA!! SPECIAL ANTIPASTOES!! in a red as sour and sordid as the spill across his floor. Dear Emily. Things are different from when you left. I got in an accident and now nothing is right, I was thinking of you, I was *doing it for you* when I fell. Tonight it was all over the kitchen, I thought it was going to rip the stove right out of the floor. I'm serious. Would the house have blown up? It was all hands, like those Coye drawings you like, big enough to walk with, five legs to a side. And then it showed its face, a little bit, like a big blur. A smear. I was afraid to tell them

in the hospital, back then all I wanted was to get the hell out of there, go home. I thought it was just part of a blackout or something, I didn't know it was going to get this bad. And they keep telling me *nothing is wrong*, that's the part that really gets me, they keep saying I'm fine and I'm *paying* them, Emily, money I don't even *have*, I'm working at a *T-shirt store*, Emily, can you believe it? I haven't painted anything since *Criosphinx*. I don't do anything but go to work and go to doctors and come home, and it's one thing after another, the same thing over and over again. I'm really scared. I'm really really scared and if I don't

There was no more room on the paper. He couldn't find anything else to write on in the kitchen except a K-mart circular and the felt-tip didn't work on that, it was too glossy, it smeared. There was nothing else to do, then, but sit there, later and later, cold now in the kitchen, the mess still on the floor, his wrist one startling pain overwhelming the metronomic rhythm of his black-stitched tongue, sit and wait.

He was going to have to do something.

But he didn't.

His last appointment, made in some spurt of useless desperation, kept, why? Politeness? Obligation? The hope that springs eternal, hinting that this might be the time, the one time, that there might be more than the ritual—the exam, the talk, the headshake, the handshake—this time understanding, admission that here, yes, here is the trouble, nestled warm above his ears, capped like a bomb, the temporal lobes like a helmet of dreams. Band and helmet, laurel leaf, brow garnished not with joy but punishment. Help me. Help me.

Dr. Moyo; he would always remember that name. The last appointment of the day, the receptionist told him; they were in a hurry, they all wanted to go home. Some of them did leave, he heard their good-byes as he sat on the papered table, waiting again, legs hanging like a child's in a too-big chair, hands clasped between his knees to calm the shaking, he was shaking in his arms, tremble threading through his muscles like some unsuspected virus. Because he had to tell. It was too much, this ninth office, stale blue carpet, a smell like every medicine bottle in the world left open to the dreary air. Too hot, it must have been nearing eighty degrees in the examination room. Embarrassing amounts of sweat, but he had a right to sweat.

Scared shitless, false starts but you have to start somewhere, don't you? If you're going to start at all? So he told Dr. Moyo—tall, heavy but not fat, red shirt buttoned right to the neck, just his luck, an anal-retentive and look how white that coat was, how antiseptic that exquisitely sheened bald brown head—told a little, little: about the accident, about the hospital. About the seizures, and how they had had to keep changing his medication, Tegretol and Mysoline and still the frantic dance.

Sweating. His voice was getting faster, like a car rushing to collision. Destiny's locomotive. Dr. Moyo had a face like a TV judge, compassionate and calm; he probably farted when he was alone and got mad at his kids and beat off in the shower, but he could have been God with that face, those Michelangelo eyes and softly rounded nostrils. Of course there was the too-buttoned shirt, too, don't forget that, it could be more significant than you know.

"And then they upped it to twelve hundred megs, and it finally worked. And they sent me home."

Silence. God's eyes on him. Outside in the hallway, a door closing.

"But I'm still having—symptoms."

"Are you still having seizures?" A slow, flat voice, no drama there, take your time. We have all the time in the world. It was five forty-five and already dark outside, dark through the window as small as a prison square.

"I don't, I. I don't know what they are." It was so hard to talk, to physically make the words. Please, let him understand, please not the face that closes, the look that means *I know what's the matter with you, buddy.* Or worse yet the face that waits to say *Have you thought of consulting a psychologist?*

Hands slick as soap between his knees, his knees were shaking. He could feel a tremble like a small walking beast down his spine.

"I see things."

No answer.

So hot in the room. Darker than ever, out the window.

Please don't let something turn silver here.

Or no: let it, let it finally so he could finally turn and scream, Did you see that? And if the answer was the headshake, the frown of surprise, then that would be answer final and enough.

Silence continuing.

Dr. Moyo shifted a little, muscular legs in dark gray slacks. "What do you mean?”

"I see,” his voice was shaking, go on; go *on.* Jump. “Things, this one thing, it’s like a color. Like silver. I see it in mirrors, or on the stove, I saw it on the stove, and—”

The face before him as thoughtful and quiet as a priest at a funeral, a lawyer at the reading of a poor man’s will; nothing there. Nothing there beyond a professional’s professional interest. If that.

Struggling harder, the sweat turning cold on him now, a feeling like looking to the place you thought was safety and finding it the bare reflection of an empty room. Nothing there. But how to stop once you’ve started, how not to say I am sick, help me? Here, here’s my sore, my pain, the spot on me that is wounded; fix it, please. Oh please fix it for me. —No, wait, I was joking, I didn’t mean it after all.

Dr. Moyo leaning forward, taking out his pen. "When you say you see this thing—”

“Look.” Standing up, the paper on the table one flat crackling sigh, wiping his palms in short strokes against his legs. Tears, pressing against the walls of his throat; flash memory of trying not to cry in school, long long time ago, what had that been all about? Blurry eyes, the beige square of his desk receding, a pain like the first pain of the first child in all the world; simple troubles, almost sweet now, nostalgia, oh God please let me get out of this office before I start crying, I don't want to cry in front of this guy.

“Look,” again, louder. "I’ve been having these headaches and stuff, I think I might have some, some eye problems, vision, you know? Bad vision, it makes me see things, all kinds of things.” Kindness—was it?—accepting the lie, writing something on a piece of paper, a pamphlet of some kind, horribly slow writer and he standing with coat back on and buttoned, one hand on the door handle, false start like a beaten dog when the doctor moved to hand him the paper, said something, he didn’t understand it, all he wanted was to get out.

And crying, in the car, hands on the wheel, going nowhere at all. The pamphlet on the seat beside him, choosing an ophthalmologist.

Another parking lot, oh God, oh God. Burned wrist hurting, tongue hurting, head hurting with sorrow and the monstrous pain, oh God I just want all this to *stop.*

Dark, around the car, and the lights of the road beyond the parking lot, people going places, headlights and streetlights, doing things. How much time did they spend in parking lots, in doctors' offices, how much at the kitchen table wondering whether they would go broke first, or first find a cure for their illness? —Say it.

Their madness.

Ask: How much? Time spent walking a border ineffable, between the here and now and the never, between the daily colors of life and the simple silver of a consciousness so austere as to permit only one interpretation and that the shiver and sly dance of insanity, how much time does it take to go crazy? And how much to stay there?

He sat in the car for almost an hour. The lights went out in the doctor's office, a pale car drove away. Sitting, still, wiping his nose on a Dairy Queen napkin, the night's cold no longer an intrusion, just a part of him like his fingers or the pain in his tongue. Sitting.

And wondering, finally, dull as something whipped breathless and then left to reach for air as best it could, wondering why it was that after peaks—of pain or sorrow, of terror—there is never a valley of rest or surcease, there is only the plain: Go on. Go home.

Go back to where you came from.

There were four messages: one from his insurance company, one from a doctor's office— medically promiscuous, he could no longer remember exactly which one was Dr. Keeter—and two from Peter, the last peremptory to the point of rudeness, Hey you haven't returned any of my calls, man, so call me back now. Hear? Now.

No.

Shivering, now the normal healthy shiver of cold, just cold, not pain or terror or shock or exhaustion, just shivering. Cold in the house, again. Maybe he had forgotten to pay the gas bill or something. The thermostat was set at sixty- two; that was cold, wasn't it?

Take the Tegretol. Take the aspirin, not too many now, that's no way. No sure reason why, but no. Leaning against the bathroom sink, resting the pain of his wrist against its cold porcelain lip. Look at you. Like the lab monkeys, rhesus monkeys with shaved heads and eyes old with torture, their intelligence capable now only of comprehending a pain that would not cease.

The mirror was dirty, speckled with greenish toothpaste spit, bringing a memory, a prank he'd once played on Emily: some joke-shop toothpaste that was supposed to come out red, like spitting blood. He hiding nonchalant in the kitchen, waiting for her shriek, instead surprised by her barreling into the room, almost into him, black all over and bellowing, "Will you *look* at this *shit?'* It was old, maybe, the toothpaste, or mismarked or something, but instead of gory red it ran pure licorice black, all over her teeth and mouth, spots on her hands where she had tried to wipe; it ended up lasting for days.

Later, "What an asshole," she said, but affectionately, she had not been angry long. Emily could take a joke, most jokes anyway. In bed beside him and the headboard lamp on, looking at herself in a pocket mirror. "Look at me, I look horrible."

"You look great," and it was true; she looked weirdly sensual. Reaching for her, nibbling those lips, exotic stain. Remembering all at once a girl he had dated in high school, not even dated really, they had met at her sister's when her sister wasn't home for lots of bare-chested rubbing and groaning: her nipples had been nearly that color, that dark fleshy matte.

And both memories now, the girl and Emily, an erection but he was too tired after all, just too tired. Too much for one day. He lay still dressed on top of the covers with a few days' worth of newspapers, tried to read the Op-Ed page of the freshest and was asleep before the first measured scold had ended, asleep and dreaming.

Of Emily, lying naked beside him, lips and nipples absolutely black.

"Do you like it?" she said, grinning, obviously pleased; she kept touching her nipples, admiring the contrast between them and her pale fingertips. Her teeth looked exceptionally white.

"I had it done last summer," she said. "Just before the accident. Look, they did you too," and to his surprise his cock was black, black like iron, like painted rock, a slick color; she began to stroke him and in an instant he was hard, wanting to be inside her; it had been such a long time, but she said no. Shaking her head so her hair brushed her shoulders, no. This way. Stroking him. It felt so good, see her smile with those strange new lips, her breath rising and he felt it on his face, warm. Hot. She was hot, she was hot as an oven, panting so hard her breasts shook, ah ah ah like the insistent rhythm of her hands, demanding, ah ah ah like a chant

and he woke in the instant of coming, “Ah!" like the last line in a poem, still half in dream and lying back. Almost dizzy, and wet, he was still wearing his jeans and his come felt warm, very warm; lots of it, too. "Shit," wearily, sitting up slow to peel them off, hand dull on the zipper, it shone a little under the headboard light, shone on his fingers as he pulled it down.

Shone silver.

Silver all over him.

Touching it, realizing, it was warm, hot, it was everywhere, ripping at his jeans, tearing them down to find more, it had run down his legs and clotted, so fast, so *fast*, some of it scabbed shiny- bright over the head of his dick, shit, oh shit, oh God. Standing in the tub, soundless scrubbing wild and wild with a towel, abrading the skin, hurting. Only hot water, drops on his scorched wrist that felt like acid, as hot as it would go and still it clogged and burbled in the drain, fluttering scum ringed round and round like an endless whirlpool. He rubbed until his arms were tired, till the muscles burned; and rubbed more.

And stepping out, finally, on legs that shook, as across the mirror a twinkling dapple, just for an instant, just for a second, isn’t this fun? Now you see it.

Isn’t this *fun*?

"No!" Screaming. Steam in the air. The skin on his thighs red as a sore.

“No!”

“No!”

Threw the jeans in the garbage, stripped the cover from the bed and bundled it, hard, with all his might, threw it down the basement where it lay half on the last two risers, flaccid as the skin of some murdered beast. In the overhead light he could see, faintly, the shiny film in its center, like a poisoned chocolate in an innocent box.

Under the bed there was a suitcase, a big old American Tourister with the key still in the lock.

He took it out, set it beside the bed. It was almost midnight; he called Peter anyway.

"Hey.” Peter sounded wide-awake, a little irritated. "Austen?”

"Yeah.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, heart pounding. "Listen. I have to go somewhere for a while."

"Go where? Where are you now?”

"I’m at home.” The flush was fading from his thighs; his penis lay in that abraded valley, small and shriveled like a withering limb. "I have to go somewhere.”

"You said that already. Listen, man, are you all right?” Now Peter sounded worried, and tired. "Are your seizures—”

"I’m fine.” One hand on his forehead. Each finger was wrinkled from the water; see how you’ll look when you’re dead. “I’m, I have to go visit my mother.”

“Your mother? Why, is something—”

"She called, I don’t know what’s going on. She called and told me to come see her.” Finally, a use for Cyndee. Looking around and around the room, what to take, what to leave. "I might be gone a little while, I don’t know. Can you take my art, watch it for me? Store it at the gallery or something?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Less skeptical now. "Sure. How long do you think you’ll be gone?”

"My mother, shit. Who knows.” My, how normal. Very good. "At least a month or two.”

"You need any help, closing up the house or anything?” And before he could answer, "Pretty out of the blue, isn’t it? Is she having an emergency or something?"

“Like I said, with my mother, who knows.” Breathe, breathe. “If you want to stop by tomorrow, that’d be good, if you can. I have to call—” work, and what would be said there? Nothing, more than likely; it had no doubt become annoyance to even keep the store open, a minimum- wage temp could do his work just as easily and probably twice as well. “Anyway, come over tomorrow if you can. I’ll have the stuff ready for you.”

“All right. How about, uh,” looking at something, a desk calendar, appointment book; Peter was a busy man, after all. Austen wrote his appointments, all strictly medical, on a city calendar he got free on his doorknob every New Year’s Day. “How about three-thirty? You want to grab a late lunch or something?”

“No, I’ll be, I’ll—thanks. No.”

“All right. Three-thirty tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Peter—thanks. Thanks a lot.”

Just as he hung up, the light bulb in the headboard lamp went out, a tinkly pop! and dark. He sat with eyes closed for a dry moment, wondering

what surfaces might be different when he turned on the overhead switch, which safe to touch, which altered by the sly gypsy jitter of a color he wished never to see again.

* * *

It was three thirty-five when Peter pulled up, new gray leather jacket and some weird kind of wraparound gloves, no fasteners or snaps or Velcro, just "press," demonstrating, smiling, Peter loved his gadgets. "See? They conform to whatever shape hand is inside them."

"Right," nodding, unsure how to comment. "Neat. Listen," hands on the bulky wrapped forms of *Criosphinx* and the others, leaning against the kitchen table, "I have these pretty well prepped."

"Yeah, I see that." Faint professional air now, gigolo's hands on the paintings. "You got a list or anything? Good," nodding back at Austen's nod, the list lay on the kitchen table: titles skittering across scratch paper, litany of the unsold. "I'll store them at the gallery, like we said." He paused to read through, inventory. Without looking at Austen, "You averse to me hanging any of it? Showing it?"

"No." Dully. "Do what you want." The night's marathon, packing, closing up, closing down, had left him now painfully tired, grit in his joints and sockets, burning. Burning. So much to do, and he had done it. Remember to shut all the windows, remember to turn off the water. Any food that won't fit in the cooler, throw out. Tell the utilities to shut everything off. "Here," pressing twist-tied keys in Peter's technologically gloved hand. "These're spares, if you need to get in or anything." Call work to say he needed a leave of absence, some family problems; no one had yet called him back. Drugstore, to get two months' worth of Tegretol, the clerk had looked at him funny; or maybe not, maybe it was all imagination. First thing this morning he had realistically closed his checking account, withdrawal of all but the token amount demanded to keep the account active. No checks would bounce, there were none outstanding; only bills. An awful lot of pissed-off one-shot doctors left behind, casualties; heal thyself: write it off.

Much to remember, there were sure to be things he found forgotten; still, in his state, he was doing well to be sure of anything at all. Since the last, what? incident? hallucination? there had been no outer manifestation, no outer sign at all; not the boil and vomit of direct confrontation but again

that retreat to the periphery, the sly tormenting borders of dream and fear. Is it worse when you can't see the monster? It's still there.

Packing, the suitcase seemed smaller than he remembered; there was room, but not enough. Jeans, shirts, sweatshirts, toiletries in a fake cracked leather case. The pictures of Emily. A spare pair of shoes. A copy of his medical records, his insurance information—soon to become food only for scam when the first of the month rolled around and his premium was left unpaid. The brain books, they would not fit so he left them loose; so many, but he needed them all, even the library ones; forgive the need that steals because it sees no other way. Think, think. What else?

He had left the art for last, because it was easiest, because when that was done and Peter had gone, so would he: his last chore a stop for gas, and then, where? Follow the lie to Texas, to his mother? He had a list, in one of the brain books, of the country's neurological meccas; once he had cherished that list as a map to wellness, but he knew, now, that for him the totems of medicine were sad and empty magic; without understanding's foundation there could never be cure; steps cannot be taken if the road remains unseen. So. He must find other gods, with methods that could admit there were in the human brain places where PET scans and BEAM scans and MRIs could neither illuminate nor ultimately reach, where another kind of light was not all that was needed, but in the end another way to see; a new vision. New visionaries.

Someone who would take him by the hand and say, very kindly, very simply, Yes. We see it too.

"—mother?"

Peter was looking at him, hard.

"What?" a little wildly. "I'm sorry, I was, I have a lot on my mind."

"I said," slowly, one hand on the angularity of wrapped *Hierosphinx,* "are you sure you're going to see your mother?"

"Sure," as slowly, unsure what question he was really being asked. "Why?"

"Well, I wasn't sure." Peter's smile, looking away, somewhat embarrassed. "I mean I thought you might be, you know. Going to visit Em. You know where she lives, right?"

The idea came new to him, but as soon as Peter spoke it it became a need. *Yes.* Emily. Emily would know; one diagnostic glance— "No,"

shaking his head, to himself more than Peter. "No. I mean, yeah, I know where she lives, but I'm not going to see her."

"Good, that's really good. I don't think Em's what you need right now."

For some reason, perhaps the heightened comic perception of terrible fatigue, this struck him funny. "Well, of course not," laughing a little, "of course not," more, harder, Peter joining in at the edges but watching him, still, no laughter in those measuring eyes but he could not stop laughing, I don't think Em's what you need right now and maybe you better go easy on the oxygen, too. Okay? Okay?

"I'm sorry," wheezing a little, winding down, Peter had stopped smiling a good thirty seconds past. "I'm really tired."

"I can see that."

Austen touched the paintings, lightly. "Want me to help you load these up?"

Together and carefully they packed Peter's car, thoughtfully lined with blankets, a downy nest for his orphaned fledglings. Peter tested each placement, making sure there would be no shift, no unexpected abrasions. When he was satisfied, Peter locked the doors, opened the driver's side. Rewrapping his wraparound gloves.

"Sure you don't want any lunch?"

"No. Makes me carsick."

Two smiles. The sun went behind a cloud, leaving the air gray, on wind's verge; not a storm or even gusty, but something. Coming. "I guess I'll take off then," Peter said, and shook Austen's hand. 'Take care of yourself, man. Give me a call when you're down there."

"Collect."

"Sure," smiling again. "If you want. I'll let you know if anything sold."

"I won't hold my breath."

"Hey, stranger things, you know?" and another handshake, into the car. The window rolled up, electricity's unseen power. More than meets the eye. He stood waving until Peter's brisk beep, then gone, and he back inside to take last stock, one look around.

He had left the answering machine on to this last minute, but still no call from work; consider this a voluntary termination, then. Maybe he could try to call from a pay phone somewhere; don't forget, admonition, take the number. What else? Anything? One last check of the rooms, windows locked, stove off, paper and mail stopped; amazing the things you can

accomplish when you're in a hurry. When you're motivated. Now it was catching up, a little, he would have to get on the road very quickly or the temptation to sleep one more night would be too strong. And that would be a mistake. Motivation was very important here, he must keep that motivation, that *momentum.* Go, and worry about destination later.

After Texas—or perhaps within its borders, it was a big place after all—he would find the ones who would understand and admit that yes, this is really happening, and to that salvation he knew he must not come empty, no, he must do his own work first, homework. Headwork. For that reason he had gone up the stairs, slowly, in the silent afternoon before Peter's arrival, to get the foldaway easel, to take his paints. Ruminating, the urgency of his flight not abated but stilled somewhat by the care he must now take: cheap brushes, yes, a handful of oils, he will not need much. Not much, but he must make sure there is enough. He will need silver, too, but of that he must be terribly careful; he must use white as a stand-in, there must be no mistakes, no loss of control.

What if he were to paint the portrait of the silver thing?

Would it serve as exorcism? or invitation? Was now the time to find out? It was a frightful idea, not only in the abstract notion of conjure—write the devil's name too surely and it will surely come—but in the sheer technical fact of its difficulty, it would be very *hard to do.*

Was he up to it?

Was there any choice but to find out?

Now: pack his car; that was easy, there was so little. The unplugged coffeemaker yielded one last cold cup, brimful, black. He checked each door twice, had an absurd impulse to fling away the keys; but no, that was stupid. He would be coming back again. Maybe soon.

So: go. Backing out, he checked once more and more than absurd: would there be, on the abandoned windows, a shiver, a glitter, some cold departing light? No. Just windows, just the front door, a house closed up. Closed down? Surely not. He drove off and did not look behind again.

In the backseat, shielded by the upright wall of the suitcase, the paints lay careful, small open bag with tubes inside clustered plump as larval insects. Beside them the heavy piles of neurological texts, nursing manuals, as-told-tos, and as Austen drove, heavy-eyed and singing softly off- key to the radio, from one to the other began a cool continuous discharge, as calm as respiration, bright as poison in the blood. Tube to tube and reaching,

finally, like eager fingers, like bright and happy hands, slippery tributary inside the books, to mark the places, to show the inexorable way.

5

He made it nearly three hours before stopping, exhausted in the parking lot of a McDonald's near the state line. He had meant only to eat and keep going, but once fed—thick food, heavy in his stomach like lumps of liquid rubber—he was more tired than ever, and so slept, cold hands in pockets, head back against the seat. Not so late, yet, but dark, and he managed an hour unnoticed before an employee, nervous and young, rapped on his derelict's window and told him there was no loitering allowed.

If he slept in motels he would go broke even faster; first thing forgotten was obviously a blanket. Darkness absolute behind a burglar-barred locksmith shop, hours a strict nine to five according to the window sign so he slept there, shivering, anxious on the cusp of dream, waking to find a curtain of white inside the car, the windows frosted slow with his sleeping breath.

Too awake to sleep again, too late to do any thing but drive. The expressway, back aching, dry-swallowing Tegretol in the midst of the midnight trucks. On the radio were songs he had never heard before, oblique wails like jazz with menacing vocals, songs of torment enjoyed. Until the station's inevitable drift he heard no call sign, no DJ's voice, nothing but that long, ominous cantata of misery and waste; only on reception's farthest edge did he hear something, a man's voice, but the words were lost in the fluttering signals, and one-handed tuning brought only the slick whine of all-night talk radio. The station was gone.

He came to a branching and without thought turned west, and south: Texas. Apparently he was inexorably bound for Cyndee's. Well. Perhaps things really are never so bad that they can't get worse. What would he say to her, how explain his visit? Hi, Mom: I'm crazy, I'm broke, and I'm back. In the pocket of his coat were the sketchy directions she had sent him upon

her move there; ten, no, thirteen years ago? A long time; small and dreary miracle to have kept the note at all. Was there any part of him that wanted her, wanted if not her understanding which was in fact far too much to even consider, let alone ask, then her commiseration, her comfort? Mother's love, mother's arms to hold him? Memory of Cyndee, mouth down in that famous curl, saying *Don't forget, you were delivered by a horse doctor.* No: remember: you have no business going there, none at all.

Untired eyes on the road, passing untold signs for gas stations, chain motels, twenty-four-hour restaurants, all the nuances of transient pause. There was a kind of hectic gaudy gleam to these places, glorified rest stops with groceries and gas, washrooms complete with sticky soap and broken condom machines and restaurants that served six kinds of food and all of it bad. Some people, vacationers, families, those inexorable old couples with their ninety-foot motor homes, moved through these oases with their own sort of gleam; others carried only a kind of exquisite tiredness, exhaustion like dirt ground so far into the fabric of life that it remained forever tainted, a slow gray color that no future gaiety could remove. And for him, well. Right now he was little but motion, barely thought enough to chart his way, to eye the gas gauge, to stop to piss. He had had enough of thinking just recently, thank you, and though he would never, ever go so far as to say, How nice to never have to think again—he had seen people in the hospital to whom that wish had come granted—still it was almost peaceful now, to ride in the grip of momentum, to *be* ridden, to feel with each mile passed some simple sort of accomplishment, something *done* about the problem, that problem in his head, that rider if you wished to call it so.

He slept two states from where he had started, pulled over, now, in a rest area, an official loitering stop. South, but still too cold: he was smarter now, he put on a shirt and a sweatshirt and used the jacket for a blanket. Head on one of the brain books, a heavy softcover nursing manual. Keep the patient comfortable. He thought he would have trouble sleeping but in a few long- lidded moments was gone, oblivious to the blank grumble of monster trucks, the perilous late-night parking skills of RVs, the wind slipping down to silence and, past two, a pale rain against his windows that, in the few headlights that touched them, shone a strange and lovely color, a silver soft as hoarfrost, as sweet metallic dew.

Morning announced by an abrupt acceleration in the interstate's volume, oh he was cramped. Oh sore, this second night had taken much

from him; forgotten Tegretol but he drank it down with water from the rest room tap. He was fairly sure he stank, washed hard under his arms, brushed his teeth twice. Changing into a shirt not yet worn, wrinkled from his bad packing job. So what, he had packed it, he had *done* it: kept the momentum; escaped. From what he was unsure, perhaps from the twin quicksand dangers of apathy and terror, synergistically capable of producing a state as hypnotic as the victim before the ax: Here it comes.

Nothing shown to him so far, no silver; but he was wise enough to know that this signaled no cure or turnaround, not even remission; it was lying in wait. How long a wait, he had no speculation. Was it lulled by sheer motion or was he the one lulled? Careful. Be careful now. Thinking, yesterday, first driving day, wondering if it might choose now to make a move, hands hard and eyes-open afraid of its manifestation while driving, watch *me* take the wheel; whee! Thought you had problems before, huh? Now you're in a body cast, now you've had a skull injury: now it's just you and me, sweet juicy isolation, all alone together: Here I come.

Breakfast from the cooler, a browning apple, bread heels spread stingy with peanut butter; coffee from a machine. Still hungry so he ate the rest of the peanut butter, knife-scraping it from the jar, watching the traffic's antlike stream: so much hurry. Even the people on vacation were in a hurry. He and Emily had planned a real vacation once, an itinerary, let's stop here and do this, if we drive half the next day to stop there and do that. They had never gotten as far as packing, spending the off days instead on a backyard blanket, drinking beer and reading magazines. Her bare belly warm as fever in the sun, black sunglasses severe as welder's goggles, he trying to sneak one finger past the elastic of her bra top. The heat made him dizzy. Afterward, drunk in the hot kitchen, eating frozen grapes—he had put them in the freezer to chill, forgot—rolling one grape down the landscape of Emily's breast, eating it there.

Ah, God.

Remember some of the bad times, he told himself; please; there were plenty.

Around noon the heater in the car refused to work correctly, windshield sullen with breath so he had to keep one window slightly open; cold, cold. He drove until he was almost coasting, stopped for gas as the last of the day's light dropped like mercury, bright lights kicking on above the pumps

as he filled his tank. Gas on his hands. He paid with a credit card. Was that illegal, when he was unsure he would be paying this month's bill?

Eat, or keep going? Mental inventory on the cooler's unappetizing contents: some cheese, another apple, half a box of stale cereal. He wanted to eat something hot, cheap food, junk food. There was a McDonald's and a Red Hen at this oasis; he chose the Red Hen. When in doubt, go regional.

It was hot, steamy with cooking and sweat, brown and orange and a brooding Red Hen. Hugely fat women with fat sulky kids; young families half earnest and half tired; guys in caps and heavy jackets, standing with the truckers' professional weariness, all stops were no stops, there was only the road. Some people still thought that was romantic. Some people had never had hemorrhoids. Austen had never had hemorrhoids either but the new flat contours of his ass were making him appreciate the possibility. When he finally reached the counter, a dull silver runway as long as a road, declining to lean upon it he ordered chicken and grits, and coffee. A handmade felt-tip sign informed him the coffee was XL-ent! so he chose an extra- large.

There were no empty booths, so: an eight-seat table, sat slow on the faintly greasy circle of chair to unwrap his plastic utensils, try to drink the coffee, too hot. At the other end of the table was a family, parents and two kids and a baby; the baby was of no discernible sex and very ugly, with all kinds of snot caked under its nose. The kids were similarly afflicted, though to a lesser degree; perhaps it helps to be able to wipe your own nose. That sounded like another Cyndee saying: In this life, you have to wipe your own nose. The mother was eating french fries with a dull and absent air, periodically pausing to check on her children's progress and to scold if nothing had been eaten since the last check. The dad ate fast and methodically, pausing for nothing.

Halfway through his meal Austen realized he was not particularly hungry; everything back in the clambox container, don't waste it. The family had gone, leaving only their mess; the table was empty. Would his leftovers be stolen if he left them to go piss? Probably. Take it with you and he did, pondering the hygienic merits of the rest room's gray-ringed sink, the soap dispenser scabbed thick and dry as the baby's nose. The food felt heavy in his stomach; it took him a minute to zip, his head felt heavy too. Tired vertigo, unguarded, closing his eyes to open them upon the instant vertiginous manifestation, mystic silver running like blood from the depths of the urinal, swirling, a slim sly drizzle down and over and up his pant leg,

crawling like a spider up the shivering hairs of his crotch and he in grim silent hysterics clawing at it, that tiny elusive sparkle and suddenly gone. Just gone. Off him entirely, but he was smart, yeah, getting smarter every day. Panting. Quiet, through his mouth.

It came so *fast.*

Where are you?

Nothing. Blue walls, blue floor, dirty sinks and urinals and mirrors, one lonely stall and there was no way he was going in there, no. Three big steps across the room and his hand reaching for the door handle, reaching to touch before seeing, quick, that cool suspicious shine; oh nice. Oh nice work.

Stared at it.

Kept staring, waiting for a further change, a bigger sparkle, something. Stared until he realized that the overhead light was at this angle striking that handle, making it shine.

Asshole.

The dining area seemed insupportably bright. The two couples at the table nearest the rest room were watching him. Did they see Cain, a marked man, silver gash upon his forehead bleeding livid as a third eye? Or just a crazy man? They were looking, though, they were definitely looking. He had forgotten his leftovers; still there, on the lip of the dirty sink; tough. Out the door, into the squamous night, lights scaled with moisture drifting too warm to be snow, too cool to be rain. Borderline weather. He got in the car and drove as he had not since he was a teenager, reckless, never looking once behind. Playing whatever there was on the radio, playing it loud. When the time came he took his Tegretol one-handed, shaking out the dose on his thigh. Keep going.

And in his dreams, not the coming but the threat of it, the long whispering silence that said, I see you.

Here I come.

Waking in a shudder, sweat on his body; cold in the car. Drops of sweat as small as tears on the bony landscape of his cheekbones, on the cooling cliff of his chin. The dashboard clock had long ago ceased to work. The rest area was empty of cars, the big trucks so many shadows, square as drawers in the larger dark. Diesel fuel. The unseen shimmer of exhaust. So tired,

there in his car; what had happened, to send him out like this? How could a person fall down and keep falling in this endless way?

Someone had to know.

Texas, the Big-Ass State.

Gray skies, driving fast as seemed to be not only required but prudent, headed for Wichita Falls. His mother lived around the air force base, Sheppard or Sheffield, something like that, near towns called Thrift and Petrolia, Oklaunion, Burkburnett. He had never been to Texas before and was unsure of its charm, everything seemed very flat, almost surreally so. Or perhaps that was only the effect of homing in on Cyndee.

He had spent the last half hour unwillingly reviewing their last meeting, the argument that had ended the visit: the tired aroma of her old angers, his equally tired response, which was no true response at all; he had always been gifted at that, the boneless shrug, the tilted glance that told nothing; at least in her presence. With, say, Emily, he was a walking nerve that jumped and sputtered, pain or pleasure, unable not to react.

Cyndee's felt-tip handwriting, its teen-girl curlicues dulled by time—much like she herself, and what a son he was to think it—directed a right turn onto a street called Rubens, advised which address was hers. The houses looked the same, most painted a dry eggshell-white that repelled his artist's eye; some artist, his brushes lay squashed against the backseat by velocity and the brain books, his tubes of paint equally forlorn. Don't think about it now. On one of the lawns sat a Virgin Mary statue in the requisite pink and blue; on another a sickly cheesecake nymph, arms aloft to support a dirty birdbath, face half eaten by some insidious plaster cancer; someone had tried to paint over it, but it was not the sort of thing cosmetics can cure. The Virgin and the Goddess of the World. He checked the number again and found the goddess's address to be Cyndee's as well; figures she would be on the side of the pagans.

God, what a house. Pulling past it to turn around, no parking in red warning letters on the sign across the street. Painted gray and too- bright blue, the roof needing tiles, the driveway concrete splintered in places to powder. A pair of nameless bushes flanking the screen door, half askew and behind it some strange door-decoration, hanging juju and jiggling, ever so slightly, when he knocked.

His hands were shaking.

He knocked again, then tried to look in the picture window, defeated by the fake lace drapes. A harder knock; he could hear, ever so faintly, a voice speaking Spanish, a fussy man's voice. Raising his arm to knock again and the door opened, just like that.

Background Spanish louder now. "Yes?"

Older, God, much older and tired-looking; that same blue eye shadow. Pink blouse, with little clocks or squares all over it. Hair half-blond, pulled back in a cheerleader's ponytail. Lots of lipstick. Did she even recognize him at all? For a moment surprising in its terror he imagined her shaking her head, turning him away. I have no son. My son is dead.

"Mom."

Narrowed eyes and then, no smile but a general softening, a kind of spreading ripple of recognition, she stared through the screen and said, "Well. You," and held the door open.

He stepped into Spanish and smells, cooking, a dusty odor, the false blush of air freshener. The room had so much furniture it was difficult to decide where to sit or if to sit at all, to keep uneasy footing in case movement was required. Everything was bigger than it had to be, and cheap. Maybe she was really broke. She used to get disability checks, he remembered, but that was a long time ago; what was wrong with her anyway? Bad back? She had once worked at a factory, light industrial they called it. For Cyndee it need almost be ephemeral.

He was nervous, very nervous; it would be funny if it were happening to someone else. He chose a sickly powder-blue love seat, unamazed at the bad taste evident everywhere; at least she was consistent. Cyndee had gone, presumably into the kitchen. The Spanish grew quieter. She came out again with a plastic tumbler in hand. It said FIRST FIDELITY in paling red letters, with a cocky eagle beneath; was that some sort of air force slogan, like the marines' *Semper Fi?* Beneath the eagle another word had been worn off by washing.

She sat down on a sofa with gold-tone upholstery, balanced her drink on the arm; there were faded half circles, sickle-shaped stains, on that arm; she must sit there often. "Well." Still that hummingbird sip. The liquid in the glass was very dark. "Come to visit?"

"Yeah. For a little while." Shrugging; already? "If that's okay with you."

"I wish you would've called first."

“If it’s not okay, Mom, just say so, all right?”

“It’s fine. I just would’ve liked to know first.” She hopped up again, left the room, this time in a different direction. Waiting, a slower inventory, not a book to be seen but plenty of magazines: *To Your Health, Ladies First.* Big TV across from the gold sofa. A trio of faintly crooked walnut shelves, apparently designed to display a collection of small porcelain figures, ornate lords and ladies; ladies first.

Determined swish of polyester; she was back. Sip, sip. “So you’re here on vacation?”

Shrug. “I just thought, I don’t know. Stop in and say hi.” Liar.

"You’re still living up north?"

‘Yeah.” A spurt of music from the kitchen, louder than the voice before: some jazzy brass. ‘What’s that?"

‘The radio." Sipping up her glass, leaning forward. "Austen."

Leaning unconsciously back. “What."

"You don’t look good.”

Neither do you, but he wouldn’t say it. "I was sick, a little while ago. Nothing serious.”

"What happened? —Wait a minute,” and up again, gone. Spending her absence rehearsing the most plausible of several dreary lies; where the hell was she going, anyway?

On her return: ‘Where the hell do you keep going?" and her fierce frown: "Bladder infection.”

‘What?”

"Bladder infection. I got it from a toilet seat at the movies." She touched her plastic glass. "Cranberry juice. My doctor gave me these pills, they didn’t work at all. But Candida, she’s the neighbor lady, she says, Drink cranberry juice.”

"Oh.” For some reason he felt like smiling. The feeling died when she said again, "So what happened?”

"Nothing. I got in a car accident, in a parking lot. I got hit.” With a big piece of concrete.

Nodding, ‘Those can be the worst of all, parking lots. The velocity.” Apparently he was more interesting because of his tragedy. "So what about the other guy? Are you going to sue?"

"No-fault, Mom. You can’t sue.” He had no real idea if this was true or not. Nodding to her glass. "Can I have some of that?"

She hopped up again. "Get what you want," and gone, down the hall. A very small hall, more like a mobile home than a house. The kitchen was big but crowded, too, a dining room set with six chairs, two of which were so piled with newspapers, plastic grocery sacks, and assorted oddments that it was impossible to imagine sitting there. Two calendars on the wall, one puppies, one apparently famous Texas Historic Scenes; Cyndee must like it here. Heavy double-door refrigerator, but inside was disappointment: cranberry juice, lots of it. Mineral water. Milk. He unearthed a beer, Miller's; she came up behind him while he was opening it.

"Get a glass."

'This's fine. I don't want a glass."

She gave him a glass anyway. Inside he saw faint rings of ancient milk, set it down on the counter amidst the rest of the clutter.

"Can I use the phone?"

She nodded in the general direction of the cabinets; it took a moment to locate it and then he wondered why, it was easily the *busiest* phone he had ever seen, so rococo it was almost silly in the hand. He called Peter, left a message, his mother's number. Everything's okay. Talk to you soon.

"Are you hungry?" she said, and for a bare moment he felt a sadness, old and panicky, he had to look away, out the red-curtained window dreary as plastic; she had no idea what to say to him, how to treat him, any more than he had with her. There would be no real questions here, no asking, no telling. Mistake. Mistake, to come at all.

"Yeah. Yeah, I was going to go—"

"I could fix something, sandwiches, or some soup." Turning, apparently flustered, hands moving toward the cupboard doors. There was a plaque on one of the doors, QUE SERA! with what appeared to be a laughing raccoon underneath; if it was a joke, he didn't get it, and suddenly all he wanted was to get out of there, be gone; an old old impulse, followed now as blindly as always. Beer in hand, turning to step out of the kitchen.

"I'll just go grab something," fishing out his keys, in the same old hurry.

"Are you—" but her bladder called, the insistence of cranberry juice and her last fretful comment down the hall, he didn't hear it; away, clean, the beer balanced between his knees as he backed out of the driveway, you could carry guns here but not open beers. He had no idea where he was going. It looked as if it might start raining any moment.

He headed in the direction he had come from, toward the expressway, and found a McDonald's not half a mile from the house, but that seemed too easy. Drove on instead, the beginnings of a dismal rain and lots, lots of traffic for what seemed a small suburb, maybe it all had to do with the air force base. Maybe everybody was pilots and their families. Kept driving, and found Silly's, the name alone such an enticement that he pulled in at once, drank off his beer in one great swallow and came up bubbling for air.

Standing in line, he belched, but no one seemed to notice. Red beans and rice. The girl behind the counter had small soft breasts clearly visible when she leaned forward to take his order, and as he looked, and smiled, he thought of what it would be like to make love to a woman again, not even Emily, just a woman, any woman. Talk to her, have her talk to you, then hold her, hold her very close. It had been a long time since he had done that; Gina's memory brought nothing but the fleeting shiver of shame, and before her there had been not more of the same but nothing true; he had not truly made love to any woman since Emily. Wondering, spoon poised empty over his rice, do we hold those we love differently than, say, a one-night stand? Is there distance inherent in the flesh, a touch that says I am not here to stay?

And at this point, would it matter?

He ate slowly, the Coke almost too sweet to drink; he left the cup half full. Outside, driving again, you would think he would be tired of driving, you would be right, but there was really nothing else to do since there was nowhere to go. He would spend the night, a few nights, at Cyndee's, but there would be no talking to her, no explaining what was really wrong; how tell her, Mom, I might be going crazy; Mom, I'm seeing things. One thing. In particular. Why did you come here, making a random right turn, why bother at all? Maybe the idea of searching family closets for neurological skeletons: Hey, Mom, we got any crazy relatives? That might be a safe question to ask, if he could maneuver her into it; once he got her started, there should be no trouble at all in hearing what there was to hear, filtered, of course, through Cyndee's peculiar senses, her hyperbole, her artful memory that seemed to sieve out only the worst. Maybe. Maybe tomorrow.

He drove through town, what seemed to be town if there was any such thing anymore. Every place looked so the same, was the same maybe, distinguished only by the topography beneath, flatland or marshes or frozen hills, it was all clichd and what did he want, anyway, astounding variety

like an endless puzzle, he would be worse off than he was. Thank God for expressways and McDonald's, they were nothing less than salvation to the hopeless and the confused. And, really, what difference did it make? Rain was rain, his wipers still didn't work right, and bars were still open just about anytime you needed one, like now, for instance.

All it said was BAR, red neon sullen in the rain; a directness that seemed right: Go in a bar and drink. He would have rather bought a six-pack but there was nowhere to go, not back to Cyndee's and he didn't want to drink in his car.

Hot inside. Cigarette smell in the air, video games that no one was playing. There might have been five people there, counting the bartender, who was thin and greasy-looking, as if he spent most of his time working on cars. Dark, even compared to the relative darkness outside, the dim drench of late afternoon. At the bar he took his beer when it came with a pleasant reluctance, this was probably not a terribly good idea but after all he was terribly tired. One or two and then go back to Cyndee's, go to sleep and sleep till morning. Maybe in the morning they could eat breakfast together or something, and he could ask her, he could maybe, maybe, find out. Something.

And what if she told him there was nothing of the sort in their family, or worse, that there was a line as long as a million spinal cords reaching back and each twitch and swoop another pocket of madness, what if she told him that? Huh? Maybe she had known all along he was due for an episode, maybe if it hadn't been the parking lot it would have been something else, something utterly spontaneous, coming out of the conscious darkness like a big silver freight train, here I am, right on schedule.

"You want another beer?"

"Yes," startled by the bartender's voice, answering without thinking. "Please."

"You were noddin' your head," the bartender said. "I thought you were calling me over."

"Yeah. Thanks."

In the end he drank six beers, a six-pack, it took the better part of two hours and when he stood up he knew he was drunk. Well. That was smart. Would Cyndee be at work when he got back? —Did she work? he had forgotten to find out. Would it be embarrassing, still, to stumble into her house, to turn his face away when she came staring up at him? A tingle in

the side of his head like a headache's gestation, clumsy fingers on his coat, would she still bother staring at him? Would she even have time, between trips to the bathroom? That made him laugh, and the laugh got him going, off the stool and outside. Blinking in the rain, it was really dark now, true night and he had forgotten for the moment exactly where he had parked.

He had to slam the door twice to get it to catch, but the car started on the first try, brisk exhaust and he could smell it, a little, the brassy odor like visible film on the lungs. Driving with slow lunatic care, he found Cyndee's house again, parked almost correctly, fiddling with his keys for nearly a full minute before realizing he had no key to this house.

Cyndee answered the door on the third— fourth?—knock, maybe he had disturbed her off the toilet, maybe she had been sleeping. What time was it anyway? She took one look at him; it seemed to be enough. He tried, old high school instincts reactivated, to keep his face averted, but maybe she was smarter now, or he was dumber; both were possible. *Anything* was possible, in a world that held such surprises, with such a surprising skull as his.

"Austen," that same, sour tone. "What'd you do, go out drinking?"

Don't talk. He went into the kitchen, realized this was a bad move, he should have headed straight for the john. There she was behind him, he did not wish, really, to really focus on her face; enough was sometimes enough.

"As sick as you look," nothing in the refrigerator but cranberry juice, water and milk, no more beer; a veiled memory of having already made this discovery, "the first thing you do is go out drinking. Haven't you got any brains?"

He tried not to laugh, he could feel the attempt in his belly, his diaphragm but it was just too much, the perfect opening, why, they should have a little heart-to-heart right now. Heart-to- heart, head-to-head, hey Mom, let's talk!

Sagging back against the still-open refrigerator and she said something, he didn't hear, bleary smile and she turned away, presumably in disgust; it was an old, old reaction, no doubt she barely had to think. By the time he thought to close the refrigerator he heard the toilet flush, small faraway roar and then a door, closing. Back in the bric-a-brac living room, he found a place on the powder-blue sofa, was asleep quickly, quietly, another door closing, as on the crooked shelves a dance began, the lords' eyes blank as

water as, one by the one, the glass dresses of the ladies turned by stages a cool unmistakable silver, as bright as the bows in their hair.

And Austen slept, anesthetized, and dreamed of nothing, no colors, no pain and no search for an end to pain. Just nothing. Just dark.

Morning and horrible, not even sick, sick would have been better. Six beers to cause all this damage, incredible. He was lucky he hadn’t woken in a lake of brain. Shuffling, strange déjà vu down this hall of a place he had never lived, was it merely Cyndee’s presence, her essence, that made this stranger house as dour as old remembered home?

In the bathroom, her inescapable spoor. Soldierly masses of makeups and creams, face butters For Younger Looking Skin. Oil of Old Lady, Emily used to call it, while admitting with a laugh she would probably use it herself one day. Hair stuff, no less than six combs in various colors. No towels, though, naturally, besides the pink hand towel proclaiming by its pristine velour dustiness that it was just for company.

There was a half-raggedy striped towel strung on the back of the door; he used that.

She was awake when he left the bathroom; he heard her, in the kitchen. Avoiding speech or he did anyway, preferring to ignore her airless grunts, her language of slammed doors and chittering spoons. He drank some instant coffee, rummaged through a faintly greasy paper bag to find a cheese croissant; it was good, too.

After a while she turned the radio on, a jittery combination of Spanglish and song, some of the words he recognized but most he didn’t. All in all it was a tiring, if absorbing, operation, he did not even fully notice when Cyndee sat down across from him and began to stare.

Finally, "What?” catching her gaze and irritable at once. Pressing the crumbs from the croissant hard into the table’s fake grain. "If you have something to say, why don’t you just say it and quit all your door-banging shit?"

Steam from her coffee, hip-hop brass from the radio. "I don’t need for you to come here and get drunk.”

"Oh, come on."

“I mean it. I haven’t seen you in I don’t know how long, you don’t call or answer my letters—”

"You don’t even write any letters, you don’t—”

"—and you show up here and the first thing you do is get drunk. Austen, I'm sixty-two years old and I—''

"I'll go," pushing back his chair. 'Til just get a motel or something." Waste of money. Cyndee say no; and what a juvenile maneuver, he sneered at himself, be nice to me or I'll run away. God.

"Well, if you're going to get drunk you probably better." Then in the next moment, "And you look so *sick.* "

Here, the cold murmur of common sense, is your opening. Use it.

He was no good at this, or not much; it took a moment to find the way to walk. "Well, I am sick. I mean I'm still having problems from the accident." And then, quickly, "Mom, is anybody in our family, has anybody ever had neurological problems?"

The phrase did not touch her. He tried again. "I mean did anybody ever have any brain problems? Dad, or anybody?"

"You mean crazy?" Affronted, as if someone had called her a lewd name. "Your *father*? Your father was the smartest man I ever knew."

Boy, did that say a lot. Dad, who had trouble filling out a medical form but could name all the presidents up to Nixon. Futile, "It doesn't have anything to do with that," but he was already losing her, now she was pushing away from the table. Shaking her head, hard. "I don't *mean* crazy, I mean *brain* problems, like headaches, like—"

Too late. Now she was onto his father, there would be no getting her back, talking about his astonishing memory, about how right he always was. A commercial for a car-wash chain came on the radio, Come Cleaner Than Clean! and all the rest in Spanish, this was bizarre enough for Cyndee all right. He felt like asking if his genius father had taught her the language before his abrupt decampment to the great beyond, but save it, save it. No use talking to her now.

Finally, weary, rising from the chair through the thicket of her complaints, what if he turned to her and simply screamed, Hallucinations, Mom, or worse, that's what I see, I see the devil in your sugar bowl, I see aliens from space in the bathroom wallpaper. Dad's not crazy, Mom, it's me. All along. Me me me. Now will you shut up?

Just to stem the flow, turn the tide, one hand, palm up like a traffic cop. "Don't you have to go to work or something?"

Turning on him from the sink. How old she seemed, in this light, wrinkles not so much carved as sunken, her whole face shriveling at the

center. "*You're* the one who should be going to work, you were going to be an artist and," and oh boy he shouldn't have gotten her started on that. Forgotten where all the land mines were, that was the problem. Maybe it would calm her down to know he was actually carrying around his supplies, stuffed in his backseat the way other people carry beer bottles. She had never, to his knowledge, seen any of his work; she had never asked to see anything and if asked he would not show her.

Now: try. Staring at her. Try again.

"Mom. Wait a minute, all right? Just wait. I didn't mean crazy, before. I didn't mean anything like that."

Watching him, as if he were a stranger come to question her, to ask her things there were no ways of telling. Her mouth pursed like a fish on a line. "Well, I don't know what you did mean, then."

"I meant *brain problems.* Neurology, you know?" knowing she didn't. "Like headaches. Hallucinations. Migraines. Anything like that." Aren't you the clever boy, aren't you the smart one to sugarcoat it between afflictions. And those were the kinds of things that would stick with her, Cyndee with her memory for the tragic, the inoperable, the irretrievable and dire.

But no; too late; he had lost her back there with Dad. "No one in our family," coldly, rinsing out her cup, "has ever had any kind of problems like that. And if you do," baleful now, "you got them yourself."

"Yeah?" Careful. "You ever hear of an accident?"

"With you it's the same thing." Bang, cup in the drainer, sickly blue drainer, as blue as that stupid sofa out there. 'You're always having accidents, you always had them. Always. Even as a little child."

Startled, "Oh bullshit," shaken by a sudden throb. Was it true? His memory gave him no such information, no special incidents of selfinfliction. "Next you'll tell me I was an accident."

"Well, you were delivered by a horse doctor, I can tell you that," and past him, slamming into the refrigerator, pouring full the big FIRST FIDELITY glass. The radio's incessant jingling seemed to reach a louder pitch, a sharper peg for him to hang his irritation on: "Why do you listen to that shit?" he said, peevish and as loud. 'The only Spanish you know is *burrito. "*

Her glare, the droop and circle of flesh beneath her eyes darker in this light; the hand on the glass had nails longer than he could remember seeing

them, long and pink and fake. His answering glare less sure, his footing less even; expected, really, from a man who has seen the capricious tilts of which the earth is capable, seen and felt to an intimate degree the consequences thereof. They stared at each other through an entire commercial for a drive-through florist, then as if released by its theme music she stalked out of the kitchen, he heard the bathroom door and near-immediate gurgling flush. And what an idiot he was, to drive all this way to listen to his mother piss. But then again, and again, there was nowhere else to go.

* * *

He couldn't find bar. Raining, a long drizzle that had begun while he and Cyndee shared a silent lunch of microwave cheese fritters and cranberry juice; he had pissed her off by drinking it with her, drinking up her supply, she must have gone out sometime during this enjoyable visit to buy more; the refrigerator was so crowded now there was hardly any room for food; Freudian, crowding him out.

After lunch he left, drove around an aimless while until wrung, by increasing degrees, by the juice's corrosive strength, he had to piss and soon. Was this what it did to his mother, increased that all-important sense of urgency where it was either piss or die? Maybe when he got back he could drink beer and she could drink juice and they could lock the bathroom door and see who exploded first.

How had he happened to find his way home in the dark, drunk, from BAR and could not find it today in the rainy light? Was it anywhere close to this 7-Eleven, across from this Laundromat? SUDSIE'S, storefront windows one heavy smear of condensation and cigarette smoke, like great transparent lungs viewed from the outside. Emily had always hated Laundromats; to him it had not mattered and so the duty fell his way. He would sit, oblivious, reading a book, maybe one of his infrequent magazines or, in rarer cases, the magazines provided (left behind, he was sure, as bait by some vicious researcher bent on seeing just how low it was possible to go), waiting for the clothes to be done. Zen, to watch them spin, less so to hear the intrusive whorl of chatter, some people had to talk even if no one was listening. He always tried to sit where no one could sit next to him.

He didn’t feel like eating. The heater in his car blew damp lukewarm air in his face no matter how he adjusted the vents. Under his coat he was shivering, wasn’t it supposed to be warm in Texas? South of the border. He was freezing in here, two shirts and a T-shirt, last poignant legacy from the T-shirt shop (had he ever really worked there? how dumb it seemed now, less stopgap than sludgy dream): SEVEN TIMES. It was easily the most obscure logo in the shop, some long-ago order leftover until he, bemused, had claimed it. Seven times.

He found not BAR but a bar, which at this point was enough. Inside, post-piss and ready, now, to notice, he found it surprisingly crowded; what his neighborhood would have called shop rats, guys who worked ten-hour days that started before the sun came up, in shirts still dense with sweat and cigarette smoke, guys who ordered pitchers, who argued in sharp voices about sports. Austen found a seat at the bar, undesirable, next to the dirty washtub filled with the tables’ collected wet emptiness, over and over; he ordered a beer.

Two guys a few seats away were arguing in the blue-faced drone of a circular disagreement, one not even meant to end in concurrence, not meant, maybe, to end at all. Next to them, and next to Austen, was a man who seemed to be with them, but did not join in their quarrel, in fact paid them no real attention at all beyond adding his share for each pitcher as it came; they drank fast. Watching made Austen drink faster. He had to piss again, and when he came back, the two arguing men were in the process of moving to a table: "Come on,” irritated, to the third, who continued to ignore them until shrugging one to the other they walked away.

Austen drank up his beer, flat draft nearly tasteless by the second swallow. All the TVs in the bar were tuned to different sports stations: football and football again, tiny battling figures in glittering reds and blues. The TV closest to him was showing the same spectacular replay over and over, 110-yard carry past defenders swarming vast and clumsy as ants.

Sideways look at the guy next to him; black eyes, steady, looking back, and, embarrassed, Austen nodded up at the screen: "Pretty amazing."

"If you like shit like that, yeah.” His voice was, what? Not rough, but murky, as if he was used to talking loud, or not talking at all. His accent was Texas but faint, an overlay perhaps of residence, not birth. "Personally I don’t give a fuck.” No challenge, no disparagement; a statement of fact.

"Well," still embarrassed, shifting a little. "Actually I don't either. I used to watch sometimes, baseball, but I quit. It seemed like a waste of time."

"That's a fact. Not enough time to life as it is."

The bartender was passing; Austen nodded to his glass. "One for me too," said the man next to him.

Austen felt the small glossy flower of drunkenness begin to open inside him, and wondered if this daytime drinking was a habit he was acquiring. Maybe it was just Texas. Or his mother. "My mother lives around here," he said.

"Yeah? Mine doesn't." Drinks came; the man raised his glass and touched it lightly to Austen's: "My name's Russell," he said.

"Austen Bandy," toasting back.

The glass was cool, not cold, beginning to sweat in his touch. It was so easy, to drink it. Antidote to memory, not the smoothing but the calm temporary obliteration of sharp edges, painful thoughts. Russell next to him sat graceful, posture-trained, his elbows neat on the edge of the bar. Austen drank more beer, desultory descending aim for the soggy circlet of his coaster. The bottom of the glass was smeared, inside or out it was hard to tell. Behind them half the bar roared at a replay, jagged laughter, opinions rising like waves, like building bricks.

Austen drank again.

He was going to need more

silver

in the bottom of his glass,

he was going to have to push his barstool back a little, just a little. The silver shimmered, untidy ring left glowing in his glass; as he watched it rose, mercury mimic, slipping up the sides of the glass, heading for his hand.

As carefully as he could he set the glass down. Already his hands were shaking, fear's reflex, flesh and jittered marrow. Stop staring. Stop staring at it. Russell was talking, now, saying something about the football game.

"—that something? Guys who'll never see a million dollars cheering for guys who make a million a day, just about. People'll clap for anything that moves, as long as it moves fast enough." Russell drank his beer; was anything swimming, there in his glass? Of course not. No. Trade you if there is.

The silver had now reached the top of Austen's glass, was bubbling down the sides, caricature of the mad scientist's potion. No one else saw it, fine; but did they see him? He remembered the gallery, the opening, watching the silver trying to leave the picture; he had not thought of people watching him then, had merely run away. Should he do that now? Or swallow the complex flavors of fear, different tastes and bitter savors; stay? The silver was humping across the bar, demure as a cartoon inchworm. Did it have a sense of humor? Could hallucinations have a sense of humor? Madman's fun. His bladder felt painfully full, as if like a child who's waited too long he might burst into an unstoppable piss there at the bar. Stop looking at it!

Faraway beside him, "You want another one? —Hey," in a different voice. Touching his arm. "You all right?"

Slick and glitter, very close now, wriggling like manic sperm. Run? Very slowly he moved his trembling arm away but as if this was all part of the game it bounced, it *bounded* up and landed, splash! on his wrist, began a swift and jaunty crawl up, past the stiff elbow, up his forearm

the better to crawl in your ear

and he slapped at it, slapped it like a bug and it splashed again, small shine everywhere and all of it like an army of insects, *smart* insects, all acrawl and on the march for him and it was too much, he shoved his stool away, almost fell and teetering back and suddenly a hand was on him, Russell's, "Come on outside," his vision rolling wild as a horse's to see the wash and jingle, it was all over the barstool, jiggering lava down to the floor.

Outside, breathing hard, hard, in the lightening rain, hands on his knees as if he'd run a mile on fire. The sharp smell of sweat under his arms. Back against the bar's brick face, he wanted to stand closed-eyed forever, did not want to go back inside, did not want to explain anything at all to this man, inexplicable savior; what's it to you?

Russell seemed to wait, choose the moment as carefully as a man crossing fast water. "You epileptic?" he said.

Shaking his head, no. "No." He straightened, eyed without wanting to the edge of the bar door; nothing. No pursuit. Nice work, scaredy- cat.

"Reason I ask is, my dad was epileptic. He could see things. Lots of things. He used to tell me about them, like the sphinxes, you know? In Egypt? They were built by men with epilepsy, they were built by *dreamers,*

man. Men who could see.” A delicate silence. “You sure you’re not epileptic? Nothing at all to be ashamed of, if you are.”

"No,” smiling this time, a little, tired. “I have seizures, though.” As calmly as he might have said *I like beer* or *I drive a Ford.*

‘You on medication? Missed a dose or something?”

Rubbing one hand across his face, slow. "No.”

‘You looked pretty bad in there.”

Austen smiled again; tired. "I bet I did. Listen, I’m sorry. Thanks for getting me out. It doesn’t, it,” and how strange, his mind said, cool voice speaking wordless in the back of his head, how strange to speak so to a stranger, a man he had never seen before, "it doesn’t usually happen places."

“What, your seizures? Shit. My old man once threw a rod right in the middle of the grocery store. Scared the shit out of the cashiers but when he woke up he said he’d seen God’s baby finger. Said it was shaped like a lightning rod.” A jaunty smile, as if he had told a story worth telling. Then, brisk: "Listen. If you want to drink some more, I know a better place than this."

Russell had a primer-colored car, four-door, make indeterminate, he drove it like a Land- Rover, like a tank on the moon. It was hard to keep up with him but it was fun; it was *fun* to be having fun, it hadn't happened in a while. No rain, window just cracked to send a chilly mist, spritzer of the gods, yeah. God’s baby finger, tickling him under the chin. What’s so funny, asshole? Back bouncing against the seat, books a solemn muffled thump in the backseat at corners, for tonight he could ignore them, tonight he could ignore a lot. Slewing into a turn he almost missed and then stopping, abrupt, Russell was parking, was getting out in front of a storefront place that looked closed. In Austen’s headlights he was lean as a broom handle, thin auburn ponytail, hands in the pockets of his black jacket.

‘This’s it,” he said. "It’s called the Jackstraw, sometimes they got pretty good bands here. You ever listen to any hardcore?”

The windows were blacked up. The door was painted an ugly military green, thick paint scabbed over in places by more coats thicker still, as if the entire door might be constructed solely of paint. Inside was no band, a jukebox wired to speakers all around the bar, maybe twenty people inside

and none interested in new arrivals. They sat at a table; Russell bought a pitcher. "Next one's on you," he said.

"Sure. Thanks," slope of his glass a gentle incline for the beer to follow; he watched its bubbles carefully, but felt safe, now, why? Because it had already happened for tonight? Because he felt good, for now, for once? The jukebox clattered, feedback rise. "Is your dad, does he—"

"My dad's dead. He died of a heart attack almost eight years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." Russell drank off half his glass. "Nothing but Dixie cups," he said.

"Listen." A heat, his neck, the slim planes of his cheeks, but he had to ask. "How did you know it was a seizure? I mean back there in the other bar. From your dad?"

Russell shrugged. "You just had kind of a weird look. My dad, he had the grand mal kind of epilepsy and sometimes he could really get nuts. Kick the shit out of you if you got too close. You just looked kind of like that, with all that arm-waving and slapping around and shit."

Arm-waving, slapping around and shit: his post-hospital life in a nutshell. "You live here?" he asked Russell.

"Yeah, for now." A rented duplex, a nothing job, a girlfriend who last week had packed her bikini underwear and took off for Fort Worth, "she wants to get a job there, you know? Dancing or something. She used to be a topless dancer but lately she's been getting a little stringy, you know what I mean?" The jukebox played "Planet Distortion." The beer was yellow, piss-yellow, his skin was a pale gray. "Some of those women make damned good money. 'Course it's no kind of job anybody really wants to have, you know? Unless you're like Deanie."

Austen ordered another pitcher. In its midst, he found himself talking about the hospital, the Demerol guy and all the Demerol guys in the hallways, the entire arena of torture and illness that he, smug with the heedless routine of health, had never even considered: the city of the living damned, right under his nose. "I never knew," marveling, still, here in this bar, at this table with this sympathetic stranger, was this the way the devil made friends? "People are just fucked *up*, you know?"

Russell's nod, slower now, he looked drunk. His accent grew not thicker but more pointed, less mannerism than simple struggle to speak clearly; maybe he was even drunker than he looked. "People're fucked up,

all right. But not in the right ways. Not like you. What's this thing you said you keep seeing?"

God. "Seeing double," false correction, trying to stand; he was drunker than he looked, too, drunk enough apparently to bring that up, maybe *that* was the devil making friends. "Gotta piss," and in the men's room, anxious weaving moments before the urinal, coaxing the flow, wondering, too drunk to be precisely panicked, exactly what he had told Russell. At the sink he dribbled water, cold brown paper towel to wipe his face, remembering his drunken adolescent stares, trying to decide if he looked as loaded as he felt and if that look would pass muster with Cyndee; his face now hooded as a teenager's, skinny cheeks and eyes tilted, a half-smile, a drunk's sly party instinct moments before the inevitable segue into pained unconsciousness. Maybe it was time to go home.

Russell at the table. "They just called last call," he said before Austen could fall into his chair, it was all he felt capable of doing. "Let's go."

In the street, the heavy air, still wet, maybe it would never stop raining. "I can't drive," he said to Russell, in fact he couldn't properly find his keys, couldn't feel the difference between knobby metal and numb thighs. His fingers were numb, too. He said again, "I can't drive."

"Well, I can't either, but I don't live real far. You want to crash, get your car in the morning?"

The nibble of darkness at the fringe of his vision. He hadn't been this drunk since that terrible party. "Yeah," eyes closed, still the inner spin. Pissing had been his downfall. Russell's driving did not seem to suffer from alcohol, although that could have been only the flaw in his perception; anyway it was a short trip, a very short trip unless he had passed out once or twice along the way.

Russell had some trouble working his door key. The duplex seemed very hot inside; Austen felt sweat at the back of his neck, stumbled over something soft and plastic just past the threshold.

"Deanie left her shit all over," Russell's grumble, heading presumably for bed. "Couch's there," under a coat, some newspapers, tired tweed oblong. Austen saw the thing he had stepped on, a sickly violet carrying case, some kind of makeup or perfume, PRETTY LADY it said across the front, capitals stretched like lightning, like the shine of headlights across water. With one foot, carefully, it seemed important to do it carefully, he pushed it under the couch. The couch smelled like dog. Was there a dog

here? Hope this wasn't its bed. On one knee to rearrange the cushions he almost fell, arm gone boneless, numb fingers. The kitchen was opposite him, and opposite that was the neighboring unit across the yard, close enough for him to see through the kitchen windows its porch light, dank yellow through the rain. Watching it he was asleep, one arm bent pillow under his head, lost Deanie's jacket over him as a blanket, a tent, denim camouflage against night in a stranger's house.

He might have slept two hours, maybe three; it was still dark, his head hurt outrageously, he was thirsty and had to piss. The bathroom could not be far; he wished, now, upright and groaning, that he had paid attention to Russell's earlier departure. Bathrooms were mostly down halls. One hand trailing, guidelike, he found an open door to a room that seemed small, cautiously felt for a light switch.

Something sticky, on the wall, faint and somehow recent. There near the floor, a peeping glow, one of those little night-light things, the things you plugged in. Good. He pissed and pissed, a river of used beer barely the worse for wear, pissed some more and flushed. Drank from the faucet, cold, numb patch on his lips, rubbed some water on his face; he felt dirty everywhere, soiled and dry. Morning will be better.

Face in the mirror sore-eyed, even in the tiny light he could see that. He looked not older but used, much used. He looked

and saw a trickle, something, fluid from his right ear.

Oh God.

A wet feeling in his nose.

He turned on the light, too bright but he had to see. Past the toothpaste flecks and the halfpeeled stickers, FOXY BITCH in cheap red iridescence, staring at the liquid leaking lightly from his ear. Down his neck. One long slow drop from each nostril, dammed by his upper lip. CNS fluid is clear, unless it's bloody.

This neither, at first, mere matte gray that in a moment, like magic, like conjure, went silver. All at once.

And it seemed as if his face was changing, not strictly transparent but as if he could look inside that mirrored head as it bent to his special scrutiny, terror's stare austere and capable of amazing minutiae

I am standing here seeing this, I am *seeing it*

and took off the top of its skull

where the brain is

and inside, the most delicate writhe, each lobe filigreed, threaded and girdled with silvery death in all its masques and manifestations, in all its irrevocable forms: the elegant pulse of an aneurysm, an extravagant clutch of tumors concealed like an oyster's pearl, clots like molded caviar and each molecule burning, shining silver light on the bone chips ragged and blood like the swirled center of a dubious treat; and nestled in the rich middle like eggs in a nest, eyes. Exquisite and long and barely there.

His hand, numb, rising unseen to catch the leak, silver on his fingers, silver fluid like the rolling waters inside his own skull. The sides of the mirrored aneurysm began, very gently, to bulge, in rhythm, a light rhythm like a waltz that speeded by stages, grew faster, fast enough finally to mesh with what he felt to be the beating of his heart, now, as he stood looking. A sweet tremor in the near-float of the bone chips, like little arrows, pretty little darts so sharp their sting would largely go unfelt, the way an experienced nurse gives an injection; the way they used to in the hospital, when the whole long dance began. Lounging tumors more pronounced. The jelly of the clots more subject, now, to surface tension, as the inner eyes seemed to darken from chrome to pewter, seemed to ask Isn't this fun? Isn't it? Now you see it all, no guesswork here.

Now another face behind his: Russell. Staring, almost comical the big eyes, greasy hair and stubble and his lips moving as if he spoke. Soundless motion.

The whole picture alive, there in the mirror, his own eyes rolling terrified as the inner eyes receded and no silver X ray now, no map of anguish yet to come but just his own face, mouth a little open, hands rising to either side of his head to track along the temples the real, the inarguable fact of liquid that was neither clear nor bloody.

And inside him a feeling of pain delayed, as if the amnesty granted for the watching moment was ready, now, for dreadful revocation, and the jellied dance he had seen enacted was due to begin again, more briskly and for real. A sharp and painful certainty of unguessed sorrows yet to come, wondering how this would kill him, when the mooring bands would finally break. He wanted very much, very much, to cry.

Russell beside him did not disappear. Russell was real.

"Did—" It took a second, all the spit in his mouth was gone. Like talking through the dry rub of flesh. "Did you see that?"

Russell rubbed at his mouth, as if a bad taste lay on his tongue. "No," he said. “But I saw you see.” Silence. "Do you see stuff all the time?"

"Not always,” how easy, now, that truth. "But a lot."

"Like—” At the mirror. "Like what you just saw?”

"Not always so bad. But it’s always the same thing," he would cry for sure if he did not stop talking, he waved a hand at Russell and sat on the toilet, one hand over his eyes. Russell left the bathroom. Tears, small and warm and somehow comforting, ran down his cheeks; they were real, they were human. Human tears.

Something cold on his shoulder and he jumped, almost fell from his seat: Russell, proffering a beer. He had one for himself too.

Pointing with the bottle to the mirror, quietly: “You don’t talk about it much, do you?”

Crying. He had not meant to cry. "No." Beer in his hand, condensation on his fingers, sticky like wax against the bottle. “I never told anyone. I tried to once but the doctor, I—” His free hand against his eyes, wiping, wiping his face. “I thought I was going crazy, I thought anyone who sees stuff like this must be crazy.”

Russell drank, slow thoughtful swallows, one, two, three. “You ever think,” leaning against the sink, his smell like smoke and old sweat, “that you ought to be talking to some different doctors?”

Austen smiled, thin twist. “I’ve been to so many fucking doctors, neurologists, I can’t even pay them anymore. And they all say the same thing, that there’s nothing wrong with me. Nothing,” incredulous. “Can you believe that?”

“Sure. I can believe anything. I usually don’t, though.” Russell’s beer was finished; he set the empty bottle on the sink. “I’m going back to bed,” he said. “If you need any help, give me a holler.”

Austen wiped his face, the towel ragged, carried his beer back to the couch. He could no longer see the neighbors’ porch light; the whole outside was light; dawn. He drank up his beer like the world’s last water and lay back beneath the denim coat; it smelled like cheap lavender, like the arms of a woman whose name you never care to know but on whose breast you rest long and contented, as if she were the mother of Night itself and in her hands alone the kindly potions that bring solace and nameless tender sleep.

He didn’t sleep long, woke with a vast headache like bands of pain around his head, but nothing sinister there, no, just draft beer. A shower would help a lot. There was a wet towel and a dry one on the towel bar; the soap had slivered down to a nub. Almost afraid to touch the mirror, to rub his shower’s steam away, but he did, and nothing happened. In the medicine cabinet was an amazing variety of bottles, mouthwash and Midol and weird suppositories and nail polish remover, he did not feel up to prospecting for aspirin there; forget it. It would stop hurting by itself with enough time.

He heard Russell in the kitchen, heard the static of a bad radio turned too loud. "Hey,’’ at the stove making some kind of food. Jeans and barefoot, hair still wet and slicked back like a convict’s. Salsa on the table. "You want some of this?” On a plate with cracked edges, eggs and crushed tortilla chips, heavy splash of salsa; it was so hot, it hurt, and that was good. The radio’s screech a backdrop.

"I'll take you to your car,” gesturing with his fork, "after. All right?”

"Sure." Peculiarly shy, now, this man had seen him at his worst, blubbering in the bathroom, crying about his crazy brain and how his doctor didn't understand him. Bubble of blond juice in his plastic cup, not quite apple. He drank it slowly. His head was beginning to feel a little better.

“You know,” his host through a mouthful of food, "to you this probably seems pretty weird, right? You don’t know what the hell I'm all about.” Russell reached up, long arm braided lightly with muscle, to the pair of fake oak shelves beside the kitchen table, handed down a picture framed in slim brown. ‘This’s Horace,” he said. "My dad.”

Standing shirtless as his son before some dirt- caked 4x4, Horace looked short and chubby and mean, like a little wolverine that can eat up a bear. Austen said so; Russell laughed, apparently happy with the comparison. "Yeah, that's right," and the rest of breakfast passed with stories of Horace, his fights, his jokes; it was clear that Russell had adored him, clear too that he reserved his greatest venom for those who, because of the epilepsy, had treated Horace as a freak, those who pretended to foam and spit, those who mugged and rolled their eyes when he went by.

"Just neighbors, you know, and people at work, but they really made him feel like shit. Like he was crazy. And he would say it didn’t really bother him, and not to worry about it. He was still saying that when he died.” Scraping the leavings of his plate, fork vicious as a knife against the tracery of cracks. “The brain is an *organ*, man, like any other organ, like

your heart or your lungs, things can go wrong with it. —'Course you know that already, right?"

Austen's smile, through the memory of silver trickling from his nose.

"Thanks again," Austen said, paused with the driver's door open. "For letting me stay, and everything."

"You going to be long at your mother's?"

Austen shook his head. "Not much longer. We get on each other's nerves."

Russell's nod, dark aviator sunglasses, he looked like a terrorist cop. "Before you head home, why'n't you call me?"

"I'll do that." They shook hands, then into his car, closed the door as Russell rumbled away. For a moment he sat back, eyes shut, his headache was almost gone; and inside: the profound calm of relief, as if a writhing nerve lay soothed from chronic pain, as if a huge tumor had been painlessly removed. Russell had talked of his father, and Austen had talked of himself, everything, he told the whole story, he left nothing out. And Russell had not seemed repulsed, or frightened, or even very surprised; that's how it is, his dry nod seemed to say. That's how it is with your brain.

Was it strange, to tell these secrets to a stranger? Or was the strange part that no one but this man seemed to want to hear those secrets at all, to take them baldly, at face value, to say Yes. Nothing more than that: Yes. He had imagined, endlessly, the telling of his story, the spilling of his sad little ganglion guts, any number of times to any number of sensitive, receptive listeners, but he had never envisioned the simple way it happened, in a kitchen, after a night spent drinking and a seizure's vision so powerful that it gave him terrors he had not strictly known were possible for his weary brain to hold. Telling his story to this stranger who was already more than half a friend.

An easy drive, he was getting his bearings pretty well. On arrival a pissed-off Cyndee, You could have let me know and so on. He heard less than half, her house seemed fustier than before, perhaps compared to Russell's bachelor squalor. Imagine, feet up, tired the good kind of tired, now: this trip had not in fact been a waste of time at all, what he had not gotten from Cyndee he had surely found in Russell: a chance to talk, an understanding ear. Not an explanation, maybe, but maybe that, too, might begin to come with the chance to just speak about it, a little, a little more.

* * *

"I’m going to leave soon,” he told Cyndee.

She looked up from her newspaper. The news did not seem to be good. "And go where?"

"Home, where else?" Although this was not true. He had a feeling there was somewhere else he should be headed, but was not completely certain where it was; it would come to him, as the decision to come here had done.

She started reading again, unimpressed by his answer. He went into the kitchen and called Russell.

"So is he named after the city or what?" Russell, in a clean blue shirt, drinking cranberry juice in the living room. Across the room in his perpetual slouch, the slouch only Cyndee seemed able to call up in him, Austen: half irritated, half amused by Russell’s ability to charm his charmless mother.

"No, oh no.” Cyndee’s fussy laugh, the sleeves of her blouse like the wings of a bird. "I named him after that famous book, you know the one, Jane Austen? I really wanted to name him Bront, but that's not really a name, is it?"

Austen shook his head, tiny, a tiny little shake of no surprise. Of course she wouldn’t be able to pronounce Brontë, it was half a miracle she could hack her way through the books; abridged versions, most likely. More jingly Spanglish from the radio in the kitchen, tuned party-loud. Cyndee went on and on, she had always been an avid reader, it was the best way to educate yourself.

"Now that’s so,” Russell said. ‘That's what my father used to say."

Austen’s father was a great reader, yes, on and on some more and Austen wondering, whence all this erudition, the man he remembered had read little more than hunting magazines and probably *Playboy*, though it was not a vice he was inclined to share with his son; Austen had had to buy his own and anyway his taste ran more to *Penthouse.* Russell didn’t seem to mind her talk. Austen tried to ignore it until it was over; it seemed to end in the middle, with Russell standing, abruptly, holding out his hand.

"Thank you again, Mrs. Bandy,” shaking hers, quick and vigorous. "I really enjoyed meeting you." And Cyndee’s smile, it was ludicrous, she was behaving like a den mother. Maybe it was a suppressed and ancient desire, maybe she had always secretly yearned to meet his friends. Right. He

smiled at her as pleasantly as if she were a stranger's mother and ducked out the door, into the exhaust-fed air of Russell's car.

"I figured, if you're taking off soon," slipping into reverse without so much as a glance in the rearview mirror, "you ought to have a little fun before the long ride. Right?"

Austen's nod, of course, of course. On the window, facing inward, was a sticker that proclaimed MY MAMA'S IN HEAVEN WATCHING ME RAISE HELL. He pointed it out to Russell. "Is that true?"

"Nah, it came with the car. My ma's in Pensacola."

They went back to the Jackstraw, where a band with a pair of amps as big as Chevys told of the angst inherent in living on the edge. Russell was not impressed but Austen liked them, they were young and earnest and so unaware of edges, the real edges on which we teeter, every day, without guessing their import, their closeness or intent. How easily the world slips away, how sorry the fall, how dire the landing and the impact thereof.

Austen was careful with his beer, but Russell drank extravagantly, and the more he drank the louder he spoke, of Horace and the wrongs done him; of Austen, and the meaning of his illness. Or condition. Or gift.

"You can call it," said Russell, "anything you want. Hell, they called my old man sick, and crazy, but what they never knew he was, was a goddamned seer, he was a *seer,* man. You know what that word means?"

Austen nodded. It was hypnotic, watching Russell think and reason through this enveloping haze, cape, carpet of alcohol, this liberating vapor that freed emotion as well as bile; his own personal pillar of cloud. Russell's eyes were very small now, narrowed as if against the smoke from enemy fire. On the pocket-sized stage the band sang of beautiful dead blondes.

"It means prophet. And visionary. 'S what vision *is,* right? To *see*? It's what you can do, am I right? Like what you did at my house?"

Again, rapt, metronomic, Austen's nod, less agreement than encouragement: Go on. He had a sense of being very close, oh so very close to a place where he might begin not to know, but to think of knowing, as if staring through the gates not of paradise but of its least satellite, of seeing not the inner sanctum but the door of the outer room: Go on.

"The Romans, they used to believe that epilepsy was divine, you know? Like having your brain stirred up by God. Julius seizure," and he laughed, a

little crow, “I mean *Caesar*, had epilepsy. Which is sort of what you have, only the pills don’t help that much, do they?”

“No,” quickly, like inserting the proper command; go on. Leaning forward on his elbows. Open the door.

"Didn’t think so. I mean, most people’d think, Hey, man, what’s so bad ’bout taking a couple of pills a day to stay healthy, that’s not much compared to what some people have to go through. But as usual, they don’t know *shit*, they don’t know that those pills don’t mean much because —I’m not trying to tell you your business or anything, man. Right?"

Go *on.* “Right, sure.”

"Well. I think it’s because you’re a seer, too.”

Silence, the sudden blare of the band restarting, bass like a train and Austen stared at Russell, stared across the table in the wind from an open door. Seer. For Russell it was more than strictly physical, it was metaphysical, both key and path, believing with the same certain rapture that his father’s epilepsy had been such as well; like the men who built the pyramids, like the men who called from clay into motionless life the perpetual brood of the Sphinx; like Dostoyevski’s *Idiot*, fire at brief moments, the flare and passion mistaken by the cloddish outer world as idiocy; as insanity. But instead, the light within. Burning. Burning. Wreaking with a fury like the hurricane of truth itself, showing him: what.

How to see.

And remembering as vivid as a taste in the mouth both his first sight, vision, of silver, there in the comatose hospital, and this last dreadful viewing, filigree clot in the mirror and the fluid stare of eyes: remembering that above the fear, above the vertiginous clutch of madness or its cool potential, above all it was *beautiful*, in each of its manifestations and powers it was beautiful, had he allowed that terror to close his eyes? Cloud his vision? Obscure what should have been, should *be* his highest purpose as an artist: to see?

Russell was staring back at him, mouth a little open.

The band drove straight into a new song, chorus like a whipping rag. Austen felt an extraordinary tingling in his head, not physical at all, as if the lobes and reaches of his brain were stretching, parted and probed by fingers both malevolent and pure, by hands unseen but as surely there as the blood that fed, the electricity that rippled slow and constant across the soft pink darkness of his brain.

He was on fire.

"You can see God," Russell said, "can't you."

Like a voice from a tunnel; he had stepped into the room now, that outer room, it was not deliverance, it was still so black he had to break his heart to enter; but now there was somewhere to go.

"No," he said. He was standing up; he did not remember leaving his chair. Russell, still in his seat, held his beer glass out and a little up, as if he might receive without warning some nectar, or poison, the stringent juice from necrotic flesh. "No," Austen said again, voice dry in his own hearing but he was barely listening to himself, he was seeing, all vision, Russell's assertions and his own first half-discarded idea of painting the silver thing, it was all the same thing: here the locus and bridge, from red impetus to the why behind. This is the thing that exists to be seen; here is your function. If you wish. The band kept going and going as if there were nowhere else in the world they might be, no other sound in the world worth making, no other sight in the world worth seeing but Russell, sitting and staring, and Austen standing mute on the cusp of figments before his wide familiar eyes.

6

His mother would loan him only half of what he asked, but seemed, in her way, sorry to see him go; she insisted on packing a grocery sack full of food, snack crackers and fake chocolate candy bars, two big cans of juice. A heavy square of slightly dry cheese, a paring knife. ‘This’ll come in handy,” fingering it, the edge was exceptionally dull.

"When are you leaving?"

“Tomorrow morning."

That night he watched TV with her, the shows she preferred; to him they seemed witless but she knew the names of all the characters, she rooted for them and laughed at their antics, their absurd complications. ‘That’s her ex-husband,” she confided to Austen, "he used to be a policeman. No, that one there, with the big bust. Her.”

Austen nodded as gravely as if these people were real; to Cyndee they were, or perhaps even hyperreal, inhabiting as they did that blessed arena far more full and precious than life itself; in real life anything could go wrong, people did not speak in jokes or aphorisms, death was rarely for good reasons, sons came and went like a bladder infection. In that other hyperlife she seemed to be enjoying herself. For Austen it was boring but ultimately safe, though he thought he saw a little silver bleedthrough, most bizarrely during a douche commercial, that sly leak surely never intended by the sponsor.

Right as the news began the phone rang; Cyndee waved it at him. He expected Russell, but it was Peter.

“How are you?” Peter said. Through the monstrous kitchen phone his voice was hoarse.

“Fine. You don’t sound too good, though."

“Got a cold. Listen, I was thinking of using a couple of your pieces in a show I’m setting up.”

"Yeah? Which ones?”

“The Sphinx series. The whole thing’s got kind of an Egyptian motif, right, and I thought those would work." Silence over the humming line. “You okay with that?”

"Sure,” unable, somehow, to visualize a show into which *Criosphinx* and his brothers could mesh with ease; still it was Peter who had the commercial eye. “Let me know how it goes,” which would, he reflected, be somewhat difficult, but there was no use telling Peter that now. "How’s things? How’s your mom?”

"Good,” remembering like a punch line just in time, "everything’s squared away.” Rushing to the bedside of his mother, that phantom emergency, how Cyndee would sneer if she knew. “Matter of fact we’re sitting here watching— hey,” loudly, to oblivious Cyndee back before the TV, "what’re we watching? Mom? I don’t know,” back into the phone. "Some show. She watches them all.”

They spoke for a few moments more, Peter telling him about his house (Usheresque? lonely like a moor or merely gathering dust? dusty, yes), giving gossip and news, Austen trying to chuckle, trying to sound as if he recalled why all this was funny. He was grateful to Peter for keeping his art and said so, said it twice. "I owe you.”

“Just work,” Peter said. “Will you do that? Can you do that there?”

"I can try.”

“When’re you coming back?”

"I don’t know.” Looking out past the kitchen’s plastic curtains, raining again, it had been raining forever here. Maybe when he left the sun would shine. "Soon, I guess.”

Take care, they told each other, meaning at once actions vastly different and yet informed with the same simple wish; do the things you must, be safe. See you soon. When he hung up Cyndee was half asleep, one hand on the remote. Instead of joining her he went downstairs, to the dryer, to take out his freshened clothes, to pack.

The next morning was chilly, gray but no rain. He had the car packed by noon, grocery sack and all, his paints now housed in a sturdy paper bag with sturdier handles; the bag read MASTRONIO’S in sans serif caps. On

the porch, hands in pockets, Cyndee on the stoop peering up at the sky like a frontier mother about to send her son west. He was not bound west.

“Drive carefully,” Cyndee said.

"I will.”

"Maybe you could come visit me again.”

Lying, "You bet,” but suddenly her smile, she knew he was lying. Humiliating and comical at the same time; he waved, smiling back shamefaced from the open driver’s-side window.

"I’ll see you,” she called, and closed the screen door, the inner door, left him alone with her eroding Aphrodite on the front lawn. He was just pulling out when Russell appeared, car seeming to choke on its own fumes. Behind the wheel was a kid in shades, hair protruding like an exotic salad from the top of his too-tight bandanna.

Russell was drunk, he smelled like a house after a party; he could barely stand. Arms hung atop the roof of Austen’s car, breathing in, flatvoiced but nervous somehow too. "I don’t have a fucking thing to hold me here, man. Shit job, Deanie’s gone and she meant shit to me anyway. I can pay my own way and do half the driving.”

Austen said nothing. Finally, as if admitting a sin, “I don’t know where I’m going.”

"Yeah? Well, I do.” Drunk, there was more edge to him, or perhaps his edges were more visible, their camouflage stripped away by the corrosive power of alcohol; he stood like an angel before a forking road, pointing the way.

Austen leaned over to pop the passenger-side lock. ‘Then let’s go."

"All right,” not exuberant but grimly pleased, half falling as he slammed open the door, then "Wait a minute" and back to his car. Extracting from the backseat a gym bag, from the front some mumbled exchange with the driver, who nodded, twice and bored, peeling away before Russell was completely in his seat.

"You gave him your car?"

"Gonna watch it for me. Till I get back. Whenever that is.”

Paints, rattling in their backseat bag. Before they reached the expressway, Russell was asleep, not so much slumped as crouched unconscious; it began to rain. Austen took the ramp headed east, swinging the wheel in a calm continuous arc, turning on the radio to catch Cyndee’s Spanglish station one more time.

By late afternoon Russell was awake, and talking, and hungry. "Stop at the next food stop, man," rummaging backward in his bag. "My treat." He ignored Austen's demur, he was paying for it, final. Final. Eating chicken and biscuits, the napkin in his hand loose as a captured bird, talking about Deanie.

"A year and a half," talking through food but he was not a messy eater, "on and off. Something like being married. You ever been married?"

"Yeah."

"Still?"

The smell of the food sorrowful now; such an old ache. "No."

Russell was silent for a moment. Across the dining area a woman laughed, a big hearty bray like a barking dog. "Deanie had a weird laugh," he said. "She used to laugh during sex, sometimes, which kind of puts you off your stroke at first, you know? Once she made me put toothpaste on my dick before I put it in."

"What for?" Austen's smile, stretching, was he being kidded? "Run out of K-Y?"

"No, no. Just because. She said it felt cool, it was this menthol Crest or something and she said it felt sexy, hot inside and then the cool. That was Deanie, man." He finished his drink. "What's your ex-wife's name?"

"Emily."

Crushing the waxy cup, "You say it like you're sad."

"I am."

Russell drove, insisting again, and Austen gave in with less than token resistance; he was tired, inexplicably so, tired all over as if he had run miles, worked hard. Radio on low, they had driven past the rain, slow-slanting sun in the ground behind them. Russell had not yet informed him of their destination; he had not asked; he did not, finally, care. They would get there; it was not Zen or a miracle but only what it had to be.

Eyes closed, soft throb of a headache barely there and he listened, Russell's voice just a little louder than the radio, they had gone from Spanglish to a kind of fractured Cajun Mozart, beautiful and strange.

"Some people," said Russell, "are empty. You're full. And you don't even know it. There's a meaning in all of this, man. You got to stop fighting it and look for the meaning. So you see shit, so, what does that mean?

"My old man, he was close to it. I don't think he knew it himself all the way, but he was right there. Right in front of it."

From a languor less than sleep, "In front of what?"

Silence. The slender sounds of an accordion, fiddle beneath like the gristle of stones in water. "I don't know," in a tone of sad admittance. "Big secret, I don't know. He died a long time ago." More silence. Then with the surety of stones breaking, "But when I saw you in the bar, having that fit, I *knew*. That's why I helped you."

More slowly still, "Knew what? That I had seizures, like your dad?"

"No," and then nothing more, for a long time, so long that Austen was nearly asleep, coasting on the brink of dreams like raveling pictures, sights and impressions, the smell of the car. Russell's voice then, as quiet as if part of the landscape of mirage: "You knew."

And nothing else, for miles through darkness, east toward the sun.

They made good partners; it was to Austen's half-surprise, but it was so. They talked like a long walk with no firm destination, Russell first of the job that he had left without notice or heed —"I was a fuckin' oil jockey, man, one of those ten-minute-lube places. My old man would've puked"— last paycheck still uncashed in his pocket. Austen, more slowly, admitting as shyly as a child with an ambition that he had done time at a T-shirt shop, yeah, but he was really an artist.

"Yeah." Nodding back at the paper sack filled with bent larval tubes. "I saw your stuff. You're a painter."

"Portraits," Austen said, surprised himself by the quality of pride behind the word; it was a good thing, yes, even now that was so. "That's what I used to do."

"Why'd you stop?"

The simplest answer. "Nobody liked them."

Russell seemed tickled, with the honesty most of all. "What, like you put in their double chins or zits or something?"

"I painted," slowly, it was a terrain rendered less familiar by the months since he had traveled it, the thoughts he had once had over and over that then came less until not at all, "the way I wanted to paint. They wanted something different," and told, as slowly, about Peter and his gallery, the abortive shows, the commissions that resulted in money lost, and time, what? Not wasted, though it seemed with each rejected portrait that he might have spent that time another, better way, perhaps mining for that middle ground where his aspirations and the photographic practicality of his so-called customers would finally meet; it never did, but now he did not

regret it. All he could regret from the time entire was that most ultimate loss, tied in what bitter way he was still unsure: the loss of Emily.

Who had lingered, or seemed to, that last day (and how sharp now that memory, as if recalling the captured sweetness of one's last breath), hands on the dresser rearranging her things. You need to do your work, she had said, I don't quarrel with that, but I'm not your muse. I don't want to be anyone's muse. And he (remember, now, tired and sharp: that cliffside blindness before such a long, long fall), arguing back, helpless to explain that she was something more, much more, she was the foundation, but this final allegation both angered and disturbed her, she no longer wanted to talk about it, she no longer wanted to talk at all. And soon she was not there, to talk or listen, she was calling from her lawyer's office, she was brisk and brief. She went to court that final day but he did not; he knew there would be no arguing her back, no death row plea would move her. Better not, then, to face the headsman, better to take the cut as a letter in the mail, a thin packet severing then from now, her from him, the dearly loved from the new and bleak and insupportable, he had cried that day until he was unable to cry but still sat making sounds that were less human than the sounds each cell might make in the dead body's growing void: Here is the end.

He said not much of this but enough to Russell, who seemed if not to understand then to salute such emotion. "She must've been something," Russell volunteered, the way one admires after the fact the calm and holy dead; and Austen smiled.

"She still is."

Surprised, "You know where she is?"

"I know where she lives, yeah. I haven't seen her since, well, since the last time I saw her, at our house." Still: our house. With a shrug, "I don't believe in persecuting people."

"Me neither." Smooth swing around a gravel train, rattling uncovered to spill an erratic rain of tiny stones. "Once they're gone, they're gone."

And Austen, who had not meant that at all, nodded.

More talk, then, not of Emily again but women, others loved or simply cared for and those for whom no care had been expended, Russell's list there topping Austen's, Austen who believed the only immorality was to be cruel. And who also, don't forget, had gotten stupid drunk and fucked a stranger then crawled off puking in the terrible dark. Yes. Their talk ran with its own rhythm, counterpoint not to the road itself or its brute miles

and markers but the sensation of motion; travel as its own reward, a sense of suspension, of being outside the time heeded and served by others, bound only by that special timelessness begotten solely by travel without schedules or constraints. Russell enjoyed driving, he could drive, he said, for six, eight, ten hours at a crack without wanting to stop; he liked the feel of the road, the idea of the concrete below unwinding, endlessly, for him to travel.

"I always liked car trips," he said. "Even as a little kid. We never went real far because my ma hated to drive and my old man was only supposed to drive to work, because, you know, the seizures. So we used to take little trips, short hops, he called them. I didn't like hopping. I wanted to run."

"I don't like driving," Austen said.

Amiably, 'That's 'cause you're an asshole."

They never argued about when to stop: for food, to piss. Austen never asked where they were going; east was enough explanation for him, and he could see that from his window. The time spent as passenger was more than useful, it was as if preordained: He was beginning, a little, to sketch again.

Not the silver thing direct, no, even he was too clever for that. Perhaps because of Peter's mention he began to reimagine his sphinxes, began to think of those epileptic seizure-dreamers who had built, said Russell, the pyramids; the fact that it was so untrue made it lovely. Their eyes as open as the endless bend of the great river, what swam in those depths more dangerous than the Nile's long lizards and their tender bloat. Building great triangles that pointed to, what? The constellations? The fever of deep space? God's own Eye, adrift in the point past creation, so huge as to be beyond terror or pain? What do you see, when you look into the darkness of your own pupils?

So: pulling into a breakfast stop, Russell had been driving since before dawn, miles of silence spent by Austen curled around his sketch. "I gotta wash up a little," Russell told him, pausing, long stropping stretch of the muscles of his back. "You drive next, all right?"

"All right." Locking the car, walking slow; he needed to wash up too: his armpits felt tacky with old sweat; the car's heater, unpredictable, had now reverted to full-bore action. His breath, soft puffing like a horse's nose, back in the cold now and treading the cold tiles of the bathroom, man's legs in the one stall, Russell.

The faucets in the cleanest sink were useless, so gingerly, with brown paper aid, he washed in the stopped-up second, rubbing cold and terse across his face, new towel for his armpits, his neck. Needing a shower. Maybe they would get to wherever they were going soon enough for him to —

From the stall, coughing. Hard liquid coughing, like a bad respiratory cold; Austen's frown: When did that start?

"Russell?"

The cough harder still, redolent with faint gagging; a nauseating sound, that meaty hunt for air. "Russell,'' Austen knocking at the door, noticing that the jeans and sneakers though familiar were not, in fact, Russell's jeans and sneakers—the sneakers especially, black and worn—but the cough went on, so ruthless that Austen hesitated, it did not seem right to leave someone prey to a cough like that. He knocked again.

"Are you okay? Do you need some help in there?"

Stupid: if he can't breathe, he can't talk.

I should get Russell.

Racked sounds, now, the sounds of someone seriously close to strangling and without thinking past the action Austen pushed at the stall door, pushed it hard against the obstructing body inside, pushed until it gave, and opened.

The inside of the stall, toilet, the empty paper roll—and how marvelously detailed his observations, that etched hysteric clarity the mind can never afterward deny—most of all the man himself, young man, jeans and sneakers and clawing hands, were drenched in heavy, greasy silver, slick and everywhere, more monstrous than blood. Scratching at his face with hands weakening in motion, still that long drowned cough and as counterpoint one leg stamping against the floor in slow pathetic rhythm like the reflex of a dying animal.

"Oh Jesus," Austen leaning still against the door, mouth open, "oh my *God,"* and shaking so he could not adequately stand, he felt his legs give and he stumbled against momentum, he must keep from falling and the young man made a sound like a frog, a sound so strange and loud and comic and followed at once by an immense quantity of vomit, gelatinous silver from the face obscured and Austen screamed, it was all like hell, hell's surreal humor, and the young man sagged down at last into that vomit and lay facedown, curled oval, no part of him moving at all.

There was time spent simply staring but later Austen could not gauge it. Russell: find him. Getting breakfast, he was second in line and Austen grabbed him, dragged him, Russell alarmed and saying, “I can’t understand you, man!” and for a moment the evil of a new terror, had he lost the ability to speak again as in the hospital that first terrible day? "Calm *down,"* Russell grabbing him, hard, squeezing pain into his shoulders. "Just calm down, man,” squeezing again, "try to breathe. Just try to breathe.”

Finally air enough to talk. He was sweating all over, he was cold, hands too cold to bend his fingers. He tried to rub his mouth. “Slow down,” Russell said, and Austen’s voice, broken: “In the bathroom.”

"What? What happened?”

"Just—” He turned, hurried, Russell behind goaded by his haste. Austen slammed open the men’s room door, held it for Russell to pass. *"What?"*

Nothing in the room.

Austen pushed at the stall door, stared, swiveling back to track for silver, anywhere, anywhere. Nothing.

“I saw it,” he said, and the tremble of reaction had set in, he was shaking so he could not gesture or point, pure palsy, "I *saw* it, Russell! This guy, it was all over him, it was all *over* him!”

"What was?" Russell shouting too, realizing, calming himself visibly like a man with an animal. "What was all over who? Come on,” towing Austen, gently then more forcefully as Austen resisted. "Tell me outside. This place stinks.”

"He started coughing,” Austen said, willing himself to slow down, to tell the story. "At first I thought it was you, I thought you came in before me. I saw jeans and—” black sneakers. Jeans and black sneakers with laces old, old and faded and tipless just like his own.

He slammed back into the stall, staring, Russell behind saying something that he did not hear or understand, and in the toilet like a perfect rose one bubble, one mercurial drop that obeyed no current but its own, swimming in circles, around and around and around.

And his own throat, a feeling like convulsion and he could not vomit, there was nothing inside him now. Russell dragged him out of the stall, the bathroom, dragged and left him in the hall leading to the dining area because he could not breathe, he said, he could not get air. Standing still but not motionless, small muscles in his face and hands abruptly aflutter, perhaps his brain was firing instructions, perhaps it was even a normal

reaction. Waiting in the hallway, people passing him on their way to the bathrooms and he did not look at them, he turned his face deliberately away. The aftereffects, stronger now as if in reaction to a true drug, his resistance weakening each time. Be still. Wait. Waiting, not for Russell but for what Russell would bring: movement; the sense of momentum.

In the passenger seat, Russell's breakfast to go. Eating as Austen started the car, jerked it into reverse and then gone, hurrying. The light of a morning, sharp across the windshield, obscured by the dirty forms ahead, trucks carrying furniture, chemicals, auto parts.

Austen's eyes as wide as if all he could see was that bathroom: "Russell," flat, and harsh. "Where're we headed?"

"Louisville," Russell said, speaking through food; he did not look directly at Austen but did not completely look away: *What did you see?* Like the man who watched Medusa smile. "Just keep going."

Kentucky was a state Austen had visited mostly by driving through; in the cold it was a thick relentless gray, soiled snow and concrete, an expressway is no fair indicator of potential charm. He had been driving for hours and he was very tired, but he would not pull over to change seats, he would not let Russell take a turn. He needed to see: the traffic, signs, the factories and motels they passed, the perpetual dullness, the overwhelming everyday. He did not want, now, to sketch, did not want to imagine, did not want to see anything but what was right in front of his eyes.

"Where are we going?" he asked, this time with a different meaning; they were moving through the day's traffic dwindling with rush hour nearly past. His hands felt gluey on the wheel, a preordained feeling, as if to remove his grip they would have to saw off his arms. Yes. His arms were as heavy as if he had been working hard all day, throwing bags of concrete, throwing bales of hay. He had never thrown a bale of hay in his life.

"There's an exit around here somewhere." Russell frowning again at the creased map, folded down to the pertinent square. "Don't forget, I was only here once. —All right, this's got to be it," announcing the exit's number with the proud relief a doctor must feel at a correct diagnosis. "Couple miles up."

Austen cut smoothly in front of a large red step-van. "I vote," he said, "for a motel tonight."

“No argument.” Leaning back, pushing his lower back hard into the seat, a long yawn like a cat’s. "I got to wash up. And you especially, you want to be clean for the doctor’s.”

After exiting, the office was absurdly easy to find, close to the expressway, small and redbrick neat, neat little sign with the hours plainly posted. "Wonder if he’ll remember me,” Russell said as they pulled away. "It’s been a long time since my dad was here.”

"You sure he’s a good doctor? He’ll listen to me?”

Firmly, “My old man said he was the best."

A Quality Inn. Russell flirting with the desk clerk. They flipped to see who would take the first shower; Austen lost. "Watch TV,” said Russell. "I may be a couple hours,” and then from behind the door, "See if they got any X-rated channels.”

Austen lay sideways on the bed; he could not remember achieving this level of cellular tiredness for many, many years; the closest memory was of running, trying to beat an autumn storm, running till all his muscles burned, his lungs protesting their failure to fully expand, then falling on the living room floor and Cyndee’s crossness, he was dirty, his feet were covered with mud and leaves. Leaves in his hair. Well, he was dirty now, too.

He should sketch. He should shovel out the car, plagued with empty food bags, pop cans and dirty clothes. He should do something besides lie here, not even staring at the wall; too tired.

Without wanting it, without awareness of crossing that particular border, he slept; and dreamed at once. Of being in a doctor’s office, trying to concentrate on a magazine while the receptionist and Russell gossiped about Russell’s father.

"He was quite the gentleman,” the receptionist said.

"He had twenty seizures a day,” Russell boasted.

The magazine article was, surprisingly, all about Emily: she had recently been promoted to vice-president of her company; he could not read the name of the company; it was something to do with medical supplies. Mostly text but one small photograph, Emily all in white, grave and serene before a large metal ring, it looked like a head-clamp for a Frankenstein’s monster, it was medieval, horrifying.

"Don’t let them use this on you, Austen,” she said. "I’ve seen how it works.”

He did not want to talk back to a magazine picture, or, more accurately, be seen doing so. With an air so cautious that it must draw attention, he slouched, raised the magazine so it obscured half his face, then said very quietly, "I have to do what I can to get well."

Vexed now, "Don't be stupid," and turned her back on him as the photograph changed to a picture of a monkey in a cage, snarling, in skinned and obvious torment, wearing a scaled-down version of the head-clamp device. The article's headline now read gains outweigh losses in experimentation. The monkey's eyes were a bald silver, rolling like a minstrel's, back and forth, back and forth. As Austen stared, a tiny bubble of bloody vomit rose to pass the monkey's lips and teeth like a perfect pearl extruded.

"Hey!" Russell was beckoning him to the examination room door. "Hurry up, man. I'm hungry. Austen?"

"I'm coming," he said, but could not stop looking at the picture of the monkey, who now had two pearls, three, six. They increased exponentially. They filled the photograph, the page itself, began to drop off the magazine onto his lap, where they burned, sizzling holes into the fabric of his jeans, lightly scoring the bare flesh beneath.

"Austen."

"I'm coming," and felt one of the drops now on his face, wet and cool, started up out of the chair and found Russell, the real one, dripping over him. "Your turn," he said. "And hurry up, okay? I want to go eat."

The bathroom was steamy, sweet with shampoo odor. Hot, hot water, as hot as he could stand, battering now the muscles cramped and tense, neck and shoulders, his weary steering- wheel arms. When he stepped out of the shower, he felt as if he had lost ten evil pounds.

Rubbing the mirror to clear it of steam, the whole room was misty, he rubbed the mirror again. It would not clear, instead smeared, the moisture beading ghostly across its surface like little balls of mercury and, impatient, he rubbed it with a towel. To see behind the humidity a smile, Cheshire-long, and hear, very faintly beneath the sound of the overhead fan, the sound of gagging.

It might have been his own voice.

Closing his eyes, steel yourself, he wiped at the mirror again.

The towel came away clotted, heavy in his hands.

Dropped it. Turned immediately for out, stood wet with every hair on his arms on end, shivering before the gentle escaping heat of the open bathroom door. Russell was on the bed, half dressed, brushing his hair as he watched what seemed to be two topless women driving a convertible.

“Built for Speed,” he announced without looking at Austen. "Ever see it?”

"No,” Austen said. Without wanting to, he looked over his shoulder, back at the mirror. In innocence it showed the towel bar, the built-in blow-dryer, the side of the door. And his own face, slack with the will not to react, to show nothing; the pale mark of unconsummated fear.

Russell was patently unremembered at the doctor’s office, but they still had Horace’s chart and file; the receptionist could not get over the fact that they had driven all the way from Texas.

"All that way," she kept saying; she had blond hair and a little pug nose and looked nothing at all like Austen’s dream receptionist; Emily was in none of the magazines, of course, though of course he checked, surreptitious, Russell seeming to think him nervous for all that flipping-through. ‘Take it easy," he kept saying. "Just take it easy.” Beneath his chair, crouched like the silent familiar that in some way it was, the heavy file, bound in plastic, his medical records.

The doctor was a little fat man with slick side-combed hair and a no-nonsense air. His name was Dr. Barnes. He led Austen not to an examination room but to his office, shook his hand with a grip surprisingly ferocious, and sat him down in a chair next to a table covered with magazines and pamphlets, the top one of which was titled “Abnormal Sperm Counts."

"What’s your problem?” said Dr. Barnes.

With the economy born of rehearsal, Austen was able to tell his whole weary tale quickly and without excess, from the parking lot through the hospital, from the endless waiting rooms to— this was the hard part—the endless seizure-like occurrences, to Texas. To here. He spoke with his hands in his lap, a near monotone, his behavior must ensure that if he was diagnosed as hysteric it must be on the merits of his story alone. He tried not to be nervous; he tried not to guess what the doctor might be thinking; he tried most of all not to speculate on the outcome of this, to hinge nothing, to assign no hopes or pressure. He had had enough of falling, thank you, for quite a while.

When he was through, Dr. Barnes at first said nothing, then sighed. "You don’t have any insurance, do you?”

“No,” Austen said. Flatly. "Not anymore.”

"It would help me a lot,” said Dr. Barnes, "if I had your medical records.”

"I have some I can show you. They’re not complete, but—”

“Bring ’em in.”

“I have them here," holding out the folder; its sheer heft was somehow embarrassing, like a police file, like a permanent record of dreary incorrigibility.

"I’ll need to review these,” already half ignoring his presence, like a man with a juicy novel to read. “Call tomorrow.”

“All right," wondering if he should leave now. Dr. Barnes was reading; he did not look up as Austen let himself out of the office.

Outside, Russell: "Well?"

Austen shrugged. "I need to make another appointment,” he said to the receptionist, who scheduled him for the next day at ten a.m. Outside in the parking lot Austen gave the thirty- second overview, and Russell nodded.

"Sounds pretty okay,” he said, "doesn’t it?” At Austen’s nod, "You want to go out for a while?” The wind was dying, an unfresh smell of exhaust coming from the road, the expressway, all the travelers beyond. “No,” sliding into the passenger seat, hands in pockets as if for protection. “I’ll just stay in the room.”

With Russell gone, he turned off the TV, sat with all the lights on, even the bathroom light, sketching. Sphinxes with long predatory jaws, a sculpted line of broken brick suggesting decay immeasurable, the drifting winds of time, passing, eroding in that passing all that was sturdy and good. The ancient art of doctors, brain surgery, removing the stone of folly; and people had lived through it; that was most amazing of all.

He did much work, nothing permanent but enough to get the feel. It was a happy feeling, a forgetfulness of self that in itself was cleansing, no, *refreshing*, he came away refreshed. When he slept it was in the empty rooms of plain dream; when he woke it was to Russell’s entrance, late, trying drunkenly to be quiet, and smiled a little to himself, and slept again.

"Well,” said Dr. Barnes. There was a coffee cup on his desk with the slogan turned outward: HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR DOCTOR

TODAY? Austen’s hands were cold, and sweaty; no amount of rubbing could make them dry or warm. "I could tell you you’re hallucinating from a nonphysiological cause, based on all the CT scans and MRIs and what-all," tapping his file, "you have here. Would you like to hear that?"

Austen shook his head, very slightly.

"Then I could tell you,” leaning back, away from the files, "that you’re a hypochondriac who’s making this whole mess up to get some attention. And frankly, anybody who drives all the way from Texas just to see me has got some kind of a problem, I can tell you that.” A comfortable laugh. "But you probably wouldn’t like to hear that, either, would you?”

Again the headshake. A small bubble of anger, the only warmth he felt. The lights in the office were a peculiar color, almost no color at all.

"Then I could tell you that, based on your descriptions and this file here, you've been dealing with a lot of half ass incompetents who ought to be banned from the AMA, but you wouldn’t believe that, and I wouldn’t either. So I won’t say that. And I won’t say what I think you do want to hear, which is that I believe there’s an organic solution to your problem. Because I don’t.” A pause, then slowly, "And I’m sorry I don’t. You’ve obviously been through a whole lot of worry and trouble over this, and believe me, I know how frustrating it can be to hunt for a diagnosis, and from the patient’s side too. My wife had this vaginal infection once that just wouldn’t quit—but you don’t give a shit about that and I don’t anymore either.”

Despite himself, Austen smiled, and Dr. Barnes smiled too. "Got better on its own,” he said. "Pissed off her gynecologist, too. But I don’t think that’s going to happen for you.”

Frozen; a moment to gather response. “It won’t, I won’t get better?”

"It’s important that you see this in the proper context. I know that sounds like the beginning of a bullshit line, but it’s just a fact.”

"What context," slowly, not even the beginning of a step, "are you talking about?"

“A psychological one, and wait a minute before you get angry because I’m not saying you’re crazy. I’ll say it again if you want: You’re not crazy. But what’s happening here has a whole lot more to do with your head than your brain, if you follow me.”

The damage to his brain tissue was irrevocable, said Dr. Barnes, beneath his lights reminiscent of some underground clinic, but the Tegretol

that calmed the hospital seizures had taken care of that: ‘T’m not a neurologist, true. But those drugs do work.” Now, since the seizures, the pseudoseizures were still at play, there must be another reason, something nonphysical. Something else. "We could call it idiopathic, if it makes you feel better; cause unknown. But I still think it’s psychological. Some lingering trauma, which would be pretty normal in your case, and which would also explain why the seizures seem to be intensifying. But you’re not really listening to me at all, are you?"

Expression changeless as that same sketched sphinx, he did not smile or deny; it was the same old bullshit dressed in homespun, he had driven hundreds of stupid miles to hear another twist in the endless tale; but was it really endless? No. There had to be, was, someone who knew how to lift this burden, how to navigate his passage through this anteroom; but it was not Dr. Barnes.

Empty, again, with disappointment, he shook hands, wrote a check, left the office. At the motel, Russell was awake; he asked little past the look on Austen’s face though his own disappointment was as obvious; he had not been the causative agent, he had led to no cure-all, no breakthrough.

“I’m going to pack," Austen said. “Where to next?”

“Well.” Head tilted, eyes almost stupidly blank. “I don’t know.” Sitting shirtless on the bed like the dumbest kid in class, the one who never knows the answer. “I got to tell you, though, Austen, I feel pretty bad about all this.”

“I know,” but without an answering compassion, everybody felt for him, everybody; and nobody knew.

Russell’s hands loose around the wheel, one arm of his aviator sunglasses bent upward like a broken limb; he said he would drive until they got there; wherever there was. Instead of speculation Austen used the road time to sketch, there was that at least and wasn’t it ironic? No, they can’t take that away from me. La la la. Sometimes he wondered if it would be better if he *were* crazy.

Radio on a forgettable rock-and-roll station, too loud to suit him; Russell singing, nasal bray, he had a terrible adolescent voice. Passing through grayness, another day of flatland cold, “Where’d you say your ex lives, man?”

“I hope,” slow, pencil cocked between fingers grown leaden and still beneath prosaic vibration, "that isn’t—”

"No, no no. I just wondered." Eyes on the road again. Austen raised his drawing pencil, considering the shift and stalk of the figure before him, child not of the sphinx or even his sphinxes but some different monster entirely, something less sinister than in some deep and visceral way unclean, something that to touch would be sheer contamination. He felt it should frighten him, was somewhat depressed that viewing it brought him nothing more than a bleak technical pride, he had done a good job. Was it because, jaded by the things he had seen, the merely horrible no longer exercised fascination? Or perhaps he was just blunted in all ways for everything but his seizures; which, to his unspoken dismay, Russell had begun to call visions; he would have to talk to Russell about that. Soon. Whenever they got where they were going.

More gray. The pencil between his fingers held tighter to compensate for the jitter of the road. Russell dialed up another station, tail-ending the last bad song between his teeth; past his arm, Austen could see the slow odometer turn but deliberately did not focus on the arithmetic; when they got where they were going it would be time, maybe, to count, to measure with his calm new brain the slow subtraction, to see how long it had been.

7

He had stopped reading the brain books, it had begun to seem an extraordinarily bad idea, as well as useless, to keep researching a dead end; but to Russell it was all new. "Look at this," hilarity's crow, pointing in the book as if Austen could see, "this guy's *arm* went crazy. His left arm. Started grabbing the nurses' tits, trying to rip off their clothes. 'No shit, Nurse, it's not me, it's my arm!' What a scam!"

Sourly, 'That's a stupid one," skirting sloppy past another of the interminable gravel trucks, this one seemed millipedic, its wheels hypnotic in their number. Wasn't there some kind of law against trucks that large?

"What, a stupid story?"

"Stupid book," cutting back into the center lane; traffic was heavy; a lush dangerous snow had begun less than an hour before and his fellow motorists had apparently lost all capability to deal with it. *He* could still deal with it, as he was dealing with this aimless trek aimlessly northward, Russell was obviously stalling. As an oracle he was as useless as the fucking books, as every doctor on the long empty road.

"Shit," said Russell, half uneasy, one finger place-marking his way through that odious collection of oddities and freaks; the guild of disease and terrible loss at which the healthy, the never damaged, can snicker with impunity, take their dose of humor; would he think it was so fucking funny if his famous father was one of the subjects? Another swerve, this time half taken by the pavement's slickness, and "Calm down, man," Russell nervous now. "You want me to drive?"

"What're you, in a hurry? Your turn's in a little while—you fuck!" one-hand pound on the dashboard, cut off by a catering truck, BOB'S. "Hey

Bob, fuck you!”

"Austen, man, why don’t you—”

"Russell, *man,* why don’t you shut up, all right? I’m driving and if you don’t like my driving I can always pull over and let you *walk* back to Dumbfuck, Texas, all right? All right?” and each word fed anger by the other like some demon’s avid goslings, he had never been, it seemed, so angry so fast. He’d had a lot of provocation, after all, and maybe this was everything at once, a diseased organ exploding, what would the organ for anger look like? Red. Red and black, and thick skin that when it blew would send shrapnel everywhere, shards like crocodile teeth, like the dragon’s teeth sown to such an evil end. His hands on the wheel were hot, he swerved again, hard, this time almost clipping the catering truck the driver of which cursed him, arm waving, Austen saw it and smiled back, jabbing a finger at him, Fuck you. Fuck *you*, swerving again, Russell beside him saying something indistinct and the windshield was clouding up, it was the heater again, stupid heater, stupid car, junk junk junk. Everything was junk to the junkman, the man with junk for a brain and the cloudy window, God, he could barely see, he rubbed one hand against it and it came away slick and silver.

Oh. He might even have said it aloud, *"Oh*, " I see. So this is how it is. "Touchy-feely,” and he did say that out loud, he heard himself, the ugly sound of his voice and with one hand fisted he smashed against the glass, hard, as hard as he could, smashed again and again as with the other a loose kind of steering, the car was drifting because of the snow, Russell beside him swearing a little but keeping it very much to himself because he surely knew, could surely see that one word, one word at this point and who knew where this car could end up? Up a creek. Up a tree. Up an abutment that was after all pretty close but he couldn’t see through the windshield, he couldn’t see where he was going at all, at all, at all and it didn’t matter, now, that beside the shiny windshield fog there was more, thicker, swarming in one area the way it had done in the hospital, so long ago when his worst worry was just getting home; it didn’t matter that it was all thick coagulating glitter and all a face, what could pass for a face, the face of the devil in hell because it was *beautiful.* Nothing on earth or in his puny heart to compare, it was so beautiful it made him want to scream, to smash his own head through its beauty and shatter it, drive it like spikes of windshield glass through his weary and suffering brain because now he had had enough

he had had enough and a great pain in his right temple, the wheel from his hands like a toy taken from an undeserving child and he sagged sideways toward the door, head on the misty window and the sounds of horns, hundreds of horns, the sound of metal ripping. Ripping like a piece of paper, ripping like a sheet you tear with your teeth to make dust rags, he had seen Emily do that, her cute little feral fangs ripping up a worn-out sheet—

"—mother*fuck,"* Russell's voice, panting, "are you all right?"

Was he?

The windshield had blood on it.

Slow consideration, it was a task he had perhaps the rest of his life to fulfill. If he could see blood, he could see; no small mercy. His temple still hurt but to a lesser extent. Stiff neck. Arms and legs later. He turned to see Russell wide- eyed as an owl, the beginning of something damaged already swelling in his left cheek.

"Are you all right?" Russell asked again.

"I guess. Yeah," gaining confidence with the ability to speak although he could not seem to get his bearings, he could not seem to orient the car or more properly his place in it, it seemed to be pointing up.

"I didn't want to hit you, man," apologetic, "but I had to, you were jammin' on the gas, I thought we were gonna hit that fucking catering truck. I had to get the wheel away from you."

Slow, "You hit me?"

"Yeah, I punched you in the head."

Blinking at the blood. The car seemed to tilt around him, sickening reverse like a carnival ride and he saw that they *were* pointing up, they were halfway up the sloping dead grass beside the expressway and the point of interest to a phalanx of creeping cars, all craning, look, did you see that? They almost hit that truck, that abutment. Look, they were almost killed.

Look.

"Listen," Russell urgently, he certainly was keeping his head, of course he had a head worth keeping, ha ha. What was he saying anyway? "—right? Because you don't even have a valid license yet, do you?"

"No," stupidly. "I don't know."

'Then scoot over. —Oh shit, here comes somebody already. Just shut up, all right? Let me talk," and already he was reaching past Austen, ventriloquist's dummy, rolling the window down.

"You guys okay?" Big fat white guy with about four bellies, three of them rolling over the top of his Big Guy jeans. "What the hell happened?"

"We're fine," and strangely Cyndee, why would he think of Cyndee now? Had she ever crashed a car with him in it? No, it was the echo, Russell's voice the same as in Cyndee's house; charm, its false essence. Folksy. "My brother just been driving too long, you know? And the snow and all."

'You're bleeding," the man informed Austen. "Yeah, hit his nose on the steering wheel. Mom—our ma'll have a hissy," inviting the smile and the guy obliged, he had no idea he was being manipulated, he saw what Russell wanted him to see. The car started and Austen jumped, just a little, and Russell was saying, 'Thanks a lot, sir," and to Austen, sharp, "Now for fuck's sake scoot *over*, man, before somebody else comes."

A complicated maneuver that, just then, he did not feel entirely up to performing but they had slipped around the car, switched seats and Russell was already easing back into traffic, escaping the scene of the crime. Leaning loose now against the passenger window, his head painless but his nose sore, maybe he really had hit it against the steering wheel and to his disgust, Austen felt as if he might cry.

"Hey," not looking at Russell. "I'm sorry." I'm sorry I almost killed you, I was really aiming for me. "I, it—" and he wiped at his face, closed his eyes against the little pain. Looking at Russell, face now adorned by a bruisy lump half the size of his nose.

"'s okay. You were having a fit," but was there the element of doubt in his voice, was he just a little bit unsure? The car had a new rattle, something broken somewhere. "Just the same, though, man, I'll drive from now on, okay?"

"Okay," grateful, subsiding back against the seat and the tickle of drying blood and the wash of snow, Russell had put on the wipers. Back and forth, back and forth; heading north, into more snow and the coming of darkness, into ice washed silver into the confines of a fluid face that knew him like a comrade or a mother, like a child, like the grinning snarl of a lover left too long unattended, who knew, maybe, what he wanted more fully, more cruelly, than he.

Sleep would be good but sleep was impossible. Reaching into the backseat, in tandem with his shaking hands, shaking from reaction, took out his sketch. Hunted his pencil. Began, again, the slow incorporation from

pain to rendered thought, from memory’s distortion to the distortion of corporeal dream.

Sleeping his way up I-75, courtesy of no-brand sleeping pills, each box held twenty. Russell woke him for food, twice, both times seemingly far apart but that could not be so; he was sleeping like a starved man eats; he dreamed outrageously. It was like a vacation, unconscious holiday; his brain in sleep was vastly at play and when he woke it was not to the persistent sick fatigue that often comes from drugs but a calm so immense it felt like a physical state. He worried, distantly, that he was not sketching as he should be, but even that was not completely so: sometimes while working on a portrait he had slept and dreamed a finish, so perhaps this would be the same, perhaps the whole idea might present itself to him, formed and ready. Maybe at one of these stops he should wake up and call Peter, tell him that yes, he was working again, finally, yes. The idea of Peter, and the house left empty, his life stranded in its strangulated tracks, meant so little to him that he could barely summon thought enough to speculate on each; only his art, stored and patient as a prisoner, had the power to elicit anything more compelling than a mental sigh. Wait for me, he thought, and did not smile at the melodrama, wait for me and I’ll bring you a king.

He woke to find them parked at a bank, Russell hunched cold over the money machine; back in the overhot car and Austen, drowsy curiosity, "What’d you get?”

“Money,” sliding it into a wallet that was humped as some strange organ, some fleshy tumor grafted onto his hip. "We’re running kind of low.”

"How much—” It was an embarrassing question, somehow, it was his adventure after all; for this he had to sit up. "I mean, how much did you leave yourself?”

"It was Deanie's card,” and then into the silence created, defensively, "Shit, she owed me almost six months rent, man, that’s a lot of money. This is just a little chip off a big pile, all right?"

"All right,” because in the end he supposed it was, and even if it wasn’t it was not for him to censure; he had taken money from his mother, hadn’t he, with no intention of paying her back? And that was just as much stealing as this. So now they were both thieves.

Back on the road, one slab to another. To change the subject Austen asked, "How long have I been asleep?"

"You haven't missed anything, if that's what you're asking."

"I just wondered." Another wonder came to him, and he spoke it: "What do you think will happen, once we get where we're going?"

"You're the one with the visions," swinging slimly past a chemical truck cylindrical as a noseless bullet. "You tell me."

Fever dreams: rich as the mental clatter before orgasm, white heat through the slick and dubious corridors of his brain, the scars of damage like the craters left by bombs; or were they humped like old cancerous tortoises, thick as scabs on the landscape? It did not need to matter; the effect was the same, and after all it was all he was after: effect.

Hunched like a vampire on the front seat, Russell was tireless but maybe it was all the same day, these were definitely more than just sleeping pills. Medicated stuff on his lips, camphor and menthol seeping like poison, like those medieval women done in by their cosmetics; the Medici equivalent of DMSO; even in his endless sleep he could smell it. Remembering conversations with Russell, long ones, he must have been awake some of the time: Where did you grow up? And Russell talking about his childhood, about Horace; always about Horace, King Dad, thunderstorm brain and lived to tell about it until his heart took him down in the end. Like a folk tale, the hero felled by his heart. Talking about moving on to Arkansas, to Texas; talking about his girlfriends, asking about Emily. He asked a lot about Emily, but maybe it only seemed that way; these pills were great.

Dreaming: of mouths, of echoes, of fingers sly and clever walking the planes of his body like a lizard in the dark, touching him, touching him, woke once in a chilly ecstasy to find that he was drooling. Russell was asleep beside him, they were in a rest stop somewhere. It was very cold in the car; where the hell were they now anyway? Nothing but featureless expressway, no clues. Above the squat square of the lone building was a light as pale green as grass underwater; they were the only car in the parking lot, joined distantly by trucks idling like faraway tremors, ready to rend the ground.

He had to piss, he was tired as melted lead and when he stood his head swam so wildly that for a moment vision was impossible; everything was moving; he shut his eyes to open them again on green darkness. Slowly to

the bathrooms, swinging shut the loud door on emptiness, the tile of the floor and walls must surely repel heat for the room to be this cold. Maybe the state didn't maintain this rest stop anymore, maybe it wasn't even a rest stop. Only Russell knew where they were and he wasn't talking.

Outside was just as cold. Walking to the car, it was really kind of hard to walk, he realized he was not wearing a coat, he realized he did not remember the last time he had taken a dose of Tegretol. Apparently he had stopped to watch the green light, cool as fluorescence, perhaps his mind had decided now was the time to freeze to death; it was not a bad death but he was not quite ready to die. He was ready to get back in the car, he had had his little joke, he was trembling, it was very cold. His hands were at his sides no longer able to flex but the light was so beautiful.

And look, down the pole itself, winding like a maypole the silvery streamers, it was pouring out of the light, how had he failed to notice it before? Sight beyond telling, beyond vision, it was coming to him now, coming for him, wouldn't it be the best idea after all to just go, go and *see?* Imagine the possibilities, things he could never hope to dream and it was lapping at his feet, it was crawling up his legs, why it was touching his dick, my my, it was as cool as emulsion, it was distilled and he leaned into it, the way a strider leans into the punishing wind, step by step against resistance and the resistance itself come from within, the heavy leak of terror thick as honey, ripe as blood, this endless step like the hovering moment above a pit as it formed, lithe and sinister, into a figure with limbs like forks exquisitely bent and Russell hit him, hit him hard, it had to be Russell because he could see Russell's face, harried and scared, maybe more than scared, maybe scared shitless but it was hard to tell because one of his eyes was shut and Russell was yelling and he said, bewildered, "You hit me," and Russell said loud and wild, "Get in the fucking *car!"* Russell threw him into the backseat like he was groceries, hit him with the slamming door, it scratched a long ribbon of skin from his ankle, his bare ankle.

His feet, blood as thick and fake-looking as movie blood, there was more on his hands. Skidding past the sleeping trucks and onto the expressway, he shook his head, shook it again as he rubbed his face with his palms, they were bloody too and Russell said without looking back at him, "No more fucking pills, man," and the pain in his feet and hands began to reach him, a little, past what he now felt to be excruciating cold. Only when Russell had slowed to seventy-five did he ask, meekly, for a synopsis.

"I woke up," through his teeth, "and the fucking door was open, and you were gone. So I got up and there you were crawling the fucking streetlight and there was blood all over and I thought what *is* this shit, and you *turned* on me, man, just like a fucking crazy dog and—"

"You hit me," but without accusation, merely supplying what part of the story he was sure he knew. Now his feet hurt hard, he touched them with sore fingers, cold meat touching cold meat.

"You're fucking right I hit you! I hit you three times, as a matter of fact, but you didn't seem to feel the first two." Now he looked, a quick glance that was less injured than angry with surprise. "I mean, I don't think it was really you, but I had to stop you, man, you were just getting fucking ridiculous. You were trying to get *at* me, man."

As if apprised of drunken antics at a party the night before: "I'm sorry," contrite but without real feeling, he remembered none of this. Just beauty, and cold, and the visceral stab of silver; it had been so beautiful that he could not admit to regret.

Russell was still talking, saying something about the sleeping pills; Austen did not wish to mention that he had eaten the last of them that very moment, the last three curled small and damp as tiny stones in the clumsy ice of his hand; it seemed bad timing, and anyway he could tell him later that there was no need to worry, the pills were all gone.

The next time he woke he was alone in the car, all the doors were locked. It was light outside, just barely; everything on him hurt; he was still gummy with blood. Truck stop, big signs for gas and food, lots of trucks and movement. Russell was just visible at a pay phone, one hand in his pocket, posture stiff and tired. When he came back to the car he glanced wary to the backseat, but Austen had curled fetal at his approach, had curled like those bugs they used to call cannonballs that became tiny spheres when you touched them. When they were scared.

When he woke again he was still bloody and they were in Michigan now, another border passed for him unconscious. When he mentioned this, a small voice from the backseat like a child under interdict, Russell said, "We're goin' somewhere different now. I'll tell you when we get there."

Why?

He had said it out loud.

“Because,” Russell now not angry but sounding very tired, “we need a third hand.”

"What do you mean?" Trying to sit up. “Why?”

Passing a car with no muffler, sound as loud as a jet. “If you go too far across the border, I grab you, right?” Silence. "But who grabs me?”

Russell did not speak again, and Austen did not press; he felt he was swimming in water too deep to have a bottom, there was nothing below but more water and water, water to the end of the world and all of it as silver as silver could be. No limits; no safety, inside or out.

They stopped to eat, and for Austen to wash; he slunk into the rest stop bathroom like a criminal; he looked like a criminal, a killer still smeared with evidence. It took a few painful minutes to scrub himself clean, and when he did he saw gouges, his feet scored in half a dozen places; no wonder he had bled so freely. Russell came in as he was drying himself, the crackle of brown paper towels, scratchy smell as old as grade school. Wet paper wads, stuck to the boys’ room ceiling like the cocoons of predator moths.

"Can’t trust you in the john anymore,” and they both smiled though it was not a joke. “There’s food here, or there's a couple fast-food places down the road.”

"All right," pulling on a pair of socks worn once before. "Whatever you want, I don’t care.”

Walking back to the car and Russell suddenly serious, not stopping but Austen did, instinctive pause: something coming. Russell faced him. Dark under his eyes, tired as a man keeping constant watch. It made Austen feel guilty, remembering his first days alone with the silver thing, the loneliness of paranoia, the trustless exhaustion; imagine: a conscienced beast.

(And when, asked his mind, did all that change, when did the notion of walking continuous point cease to disturb so thoroughly, when did it get easy? It’s never easy, bitterly back. It only gets worse. But you can only be so tired. It takes energy, to hold things in.)

Russell squinted, light in his eyes. “What did you see?" not so much shy as cautious, perhaps this was a question safer unanswered; but there was greed there somewhere, too. “What were you seeing when I popped you?”

"It’s, it's hard to—” Stopped by his own ability to articulate, he did not remember so much vision as touch, the crawling climb of liquid, the *feel* of it: how to explain the luminosity, the theater of mirage come real in a surge

of terror and blood, mad half-martial approach to the monster’s play. He did his best; a poor telling, less shadow of the real than the shadow’s dream, it could not satisfy but Russell did not press.

“All right," he said. They resumed walking, got into the car, and Austen had to slam his door twice, his arms felt weak as if the door weighed hundreds and hundreds of pounds. " ’Cause I knew you were seeing something pretty wicked, anybody could tell that.”

With enormous diffidence, staring straight through the windshield as if an incautious eye might be instantly and brutally blinded, “Do you ever see anything, you know, scary? Scary things?”

“No. —Yeah.” The car’s engine. "I see you.”

Silence.

"I’m going to work awhile,” Austen said, still careful to see nothing, reaching for his sketches, realizing with sudden puzzlement that there were more of them than he recalled completing, there were many, many sketches, he sifted faster and more roughly, first the sphinxes and then men with the hindquarters and genitals of dogs, women with alligator heads, children plucking tunes on the bones of their mothers with the spines of dead fish in their hair, and then things both wilder and less definable, things that resisted all possible categorization, things that might have come from places where the elements are blood and acid, where fire is air and air is a trustless medium to be molded or shrunk or banished by whim; he had no memory of any of these creatures, none of them with their small tilted eyes and smiling chops, none.

But they were all his, indisputably; he saw that in each feverish line, each cold crosshatched scale. No one could fake him like this and even if they could, there was no one here but Russell.

Who saw him looking, digging wild through the drawings and said, "Well, that’s one thing you can say for those pills, they sure made you work like a motherfucker.” Austen did not answer. It was hard to breathe, impossible to talk. “You want to go to McDonald’s?”

Nodding, sun through the window hurting his eyes. Again the terror of the hospital but he felt it from above, another order of magnitude from the first cool pallid beginnings that were now nothing more than nostalgic, it would be good to be only that afraid again. As it was he sat, empty of all that was smaller than the fear: ridden, now, with sharper bit, dry bile against the porous landscape of his teeth, caught as he was caught, prisoned and

burning, burning dry. When he swallowed it was loud as a cough; Russell glanced at him, sharp, then away.

The drive-through, and food, Russell ate enormously; the smell made Austen feel sick but he tried to eat what he could, it would be a while before they stopped again. Russell flicked a small hard piece of french fry at him, bantering smile but they both knew it was forced; something had changed. ‘You gonna work awhile?” he asked, wiping at his mouth, a faint drop of uncaught sauce still lingering in the crease; it looked like exotic pus, the blurt from a small unique wound.

"I don’t know." Yes, you do. “Maybe. Probably.”

Drawings like the shed skin of a beast unconscionable. His lying fingers loose on a box filled with strips of chicken, oily circle of red sauce and he dipped, and ate, and dipped and ate again, chewing slow as if he might gag while Russell talked about getting laid and how it had been too long, his dick was hard as a baseball bat.

Half a smile, as forced as his mechanical swallowing, the food tasted like old lard. "Don’t look at me.”

“Don’t worry, you’re not worth looking at. I mean it, next time we stop we have to get some pussy. What about it?” and on and on, grinning, when’s the last time you had any, you saving it up for your ex-wife or what? It sounded ludicrous when he said it and in fact it was not true, not really; but besides the few encounters and of course that last shaming tryst with, what was her name? Gina, since Gina he had had no one at all. He did not now feel in the least inclined, medication, depression, the sheer weight of cross-country madness would more than likely account for that; exhausting too the black endlessness of sheer fear; but the idea held in its contours the promise of interest, yes, nodding, yes. Something maybe to look forward to besides drawings he could not account for and manifestations he could not remember, not fully, not anymore; besides the slow suicidal contemplation of what he had become; he had yet to name it but the name, he knew with dreadful regret, was absolutely there.

They drove through Detroit and past it, swinging to 1-94, west; surprising Austen. West, they still had not really stopped, an overnight sleep in the car; restful because visionless, bloodless, sane. No more new drawings but the beginning of the one real portrait; he worked small and

thick in oils, it took forever to dry when the paint was that heavy but he was done sketching for now.

Jackson was a city with a state prison and signs that read DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS. "Especially in uniform," Russell said. Snow skittering across the windshield, but leisurely, as if a second ice age was coming and had all the time in the world to drift into death. “Want to stop here or go on a little ways?”

"If you’d tell me where we were going,” gingerly testing the colors, heavy black like shoe polish, "I could answer you better.” He would not use silver; he was enough of an artist to get by without it, he thought so anyway and if he was wrong what did it matter? Only the pictures on his wall, and maybe Peter, would ever see this; but it was significant in a way all his other works had never been, there was a power in it, he was unsure what that power was but he would definitely be—

“—are you? Not a fucking word.”

“What?” Foolish gaze like the idiot child who always half expects a whipping. "I didn’t hear.”

"I know." Patienceless and abrupt, what kind of a line did Russell walk, anyway? and how long could he be expected to walk it? "I said, let’s go a ways then stop for the night. All right?”

"Sure.” His gaze on the painting again, the seed of it, its wriggling beginnings like the first squirm of life in the void, like the world’s first lonely sperm. "Whatever you want."

“Fuck!” with such unexpected rage that Austen literally jumped, the painting joggling in his grasp; a minute scrape of oil lay indelible on the window’s grimy handle. "Is that all you can say? It’s like being with a fucking ghost, either you’re freaking out and tryin’ to kill me or you’re working on another picture or you’re not even there! *Talk* a little sometimes, will you, about the fucking weather or sing to the radio or whatever, just make some noise once in a while so I’ll know you’re still alive!”

The silence that follows any storm; then, “Sorry,” from Russell; he did not seem sorry, only sorry to have spoken; and what else was left unsaid? "Just forget I said anything, okay?”

"Sure.” Doubly silenced by the command to talk, he said nothing, was leery of starting work; but as nothing else was said, cautiously, slowly, began to add in one corner the thick meticulous red: the blood.

It was a bar like BAR, only more so, the smoke thinner and more insidious, men's room more rank and sour. Less than a dozen people sat at the tables and the long slippery bar itself, but it was barely eight o'clock. Russell sat drinking shots of vodka, his mood unimproved; Austen was glum beside him, toying with a beer, the cheapest draft possible. They should not have been wasting money in bars but he was not about to say any of that, no, he was going to say nothing at all that was not pleasant, or trivial, or both.

"Hot in here," he said.

"It's a fuckin' dive, is what it is," glaring up at the TV on which a cornucopia of sports highlights and bloopers seemingly revolved without end. "Let me finish this, and we'll go."

The beer tasted very bad, almost soapy, as if the glass had been washed but not rinsed. Trying for cheerful, or at least involved, "Where to?"

"Out of here," pushing away from the bar, Austen following out into the slush. The car was cold; Austen wanted to check the paint, see if it was any drier; did not. "While you were pissing," Russell said, loose arc of the wheel as they barreled backward, then forward in a wide, lurching spin, "or whatever it was you were doing in there, I looked in the Yellow Pages and I found us a titty bar. It's called Carol's. Supposed to be not too far from here."

'They have topless bars in the Yellow Pages?"

"Sure. 'Adult entertainment.' You're an adult, aren't you?"

KAROL'S, a big sign, and TOPLESS GIRLS even bigger. This parking lot was jammed; there was even a little line to get in, three or four dumb-looking guys laughing very loud; they were young, Austen saw, maybe not even out of their teens: fake IDs and an evening spent staring at girls who would not speak to them unless they bought drinks.

Russell nudged him for the cover; it was higher than he had expected but he said nothing. The only seats they could find were far back from the bar, at a table too small to hold anything more than fifty pounds maximum. Russell ordered more vodka from the barmaid, crotch- cut jumpsuit in stretch lace and a dry determined smile; Austen got a beer.

Merely being there seemed to soothe Russell; he spoke less, smiled more. Three women were dancing, two blondes and a woman whose brown hair, spiked with heavy gel, stood out like a dinosaur's spine. Russell went up and said something to her, passed her a bill, said something else and she

smiled, a real smile. An old Rolling Stones song started to play; she mouthed the words as she danced, as if the song was a favorite. When the song ended she hopped down nimble as a child, stood expectant before the bar for Russell's weaving advance, he was smiling too, toothy as the Big Bad Wolf. Austen remembered trying to tease Emily into going along with some friends to a topless bar, a nude bar, he could not remember. Emily had laughed, said if she wanted to see a naked woman all she had to do was look in the mirror. That night he had made love to her, thinking all the while of her dancing, nude, not in a bar but in some vacuum where no eyes knew her but his; he had cried out when he came and, still panting, opened his eyes to see her cool ironical smile; did she know what he was thinking? Was she laughing at him?

Russell said something, his voice overwhelmed by the music but he laughed, and Austen smiled, raised his glass to meet Russell's, a toast. What were they toasting? Bare breasts? Probably. He remembered Russell saying his exgirlfriend Deanie was a topless dancer.

The bar closed at two; by that time Russell was so drunk he could barely speak, sagged in his seat as if two vertebrae had been cunningly removed. He had drunk, how much? it was impossible to know, here they scooped up the empties as fast as you drank them, it was not in their interest for you to know exactly how much money you were spending; Austen with his determinedly nursable beer had been an object of silent scorn for them; nothing was worse than a cheapskate. One of the barmaids approached them, told them it was time to leave. "Go on home," she said, and it made Austen want to smile. Russell mumbled something about pretty and reached for her breasts; her sideways evasion informed with the thoughtless elegance of much practice; every night drunken guys tried to grab her, and every night she turned away.

Russell fell down in the parking lot, twice, rose cursing to fall again. "Come on," Austen lifting him, "let me drag you for a change," but Russell was past jokes, he was in that sour gray borderland between drunk and ill. Before pushing him into the backseat, Austen took the car keys; they lay strange in his hand. It had been a while since he had driven his own car.

Now. A Red Roof Inn somewhere close by, Russell had remarked on it in passing; tonight they must not sleep outside: hypothermia, drunks freezing, and anyway they had wasted so much money they could waste a little more.

He checked in alone, asked for a ground-floor room and got it; back at the car he found Russell had pissed himself, cold spot left on the seat behind. Wrestling him upright, slowly across the frosted pavement, dragging a dead weight that groaned and shuddered as they moved from darkness into beige light and the coolness of an unused room, door slamming the opposite wall, dumping him hard on the only bed. Pissing in the bathroom, a little light-headed from the beer. It was two-thirty now.

Most of the paint was dry; he could work awhile; he was not tired. Russell slept, mouth open and dry sounds unpleasantly like the choking noises made by the man in the bathroom, the man strangling on silver.

Don't think about that.

The light in the room was muddy and poor; he moved to the bathroom where the fluorescents' underwater glare washed all his colors green, a sick color, the color of infection and waste and flesh cut away, offered to the progress of the kind and cauterizing knife. Scalpel. Laser. Cutting clean. He had his back against the tub, it was not a natural position but the discomfort could not reach him; he was making of blood an adornment, the rich verdigris of unreal flesh, of metal, of the sound the brain makes when seized by knowing hands and *squeezed*, squeezed *hard*, pink fruit purpling in a flood of pewter-gray, gush and splash like the fountain of knowledge itself: you will be as gods.

A figure, building.

The light was not what should be, but perfect: in it he saw what he could not have seen, his hands were shaking. A gash of glitter walked the bridging brush to strut his flesh, brother molecules aswarm in the light before his eyes like the borealis gleam before a faint, his hand was gloved in it now. He had set the painting aside, to dry? He was unsure. His hands were covered but somehow it was not frightening, or disturbing, it was simply and absolutely right, it was exactly as it should have been all along. Had his fingers sprouted extra joints, as crooked and droll as a mantis, it was something to watch them flex and jitter as he tried to pick up, yes, his brush from the floor, apparently he had dropped it. The mirror showed him other changes, a sheen to his flesh he had never before noticed and now beneath each eye socket a strange little slash of color, deep red, like the markings of a warrior painted to terrify and wound victorious, it made him look very different, he had never seemed to himself even remotely a threatening character but he looked threatening now. He went, or was

moved, he did not remember instigating the motion but found himself in the other room, the room with the bed and Russell stretched across it, lumpy and sick, he had thrown up on the coverlet, his eyes were still closed.

“Russell?"

Had he spoken aloud? How strange to look down and see those distorted fingers sprouting like antennae or weeds in a garden, it seemed like something he ought to be upset about but it was just so extremely interesting, all his skin was that strange color now. A pulsing, somewhere around the bones of his wrists, like little throbbing clocks beneath the demure coverlet of skin and he raised his arms to show Russell, to say, Hey, isn’t this weird? Look.

Look.

Look at me.

Russell’s eyes lolling open, then wincing shut, as if he could not bear what he had seen, could not bear to verify by another glimpse. “Look, Russell,” almost playfully, “I—”

And he was on the floor, how had he gotten on the floor? Russell above him, vomiting over the side of the bed, ugly sounds and he moved to help but found he could not move, found himself slick and bound, when he opened his mouth he could no longer talk. Stuff like gelatin, when he moved his teeth he could feel it, a horrible feeling, his mouth force-fed. Full, and Russell was trying to get up, now, he was trying for the door, where did he think he was going? He should stay and help. "Help me,” Austen tried to say, but found his curious new fingers to be of immensely greater aid, he pinched at Russell, trapped one lurching leg and held on.

Russell was speaking and he could not understand, he lifted his hands to clear his ears, wipe at his face and they came back to him bloody, they

and a pocket of absolute silence, as if all the sound had been sucked by force immense from the square of the room

and the back-blown vortex of consciousness, like waking in the middle of a war, a burning, the shivering second after a wreck in the gaze of the still-spinning wheels and Austen screamed

and Russell, robbed of balance, fell backward onto the bed and Austen screamed again because he was *awake* now, he could *see*, one eye working and he was covered in silver, there was silver in his mouth, oh God and blood, blood all over his hands and now someone was hitting the door, hard. Yelling something.

Oh God. Oh God. Russell trying to sit up and he scrambling like a crab, hide somewhere, the bathroom, shut the door. "Help me!" hysteric but Russell was past helping anyone, it was less than possible for him to help himself. When Austen tried to walk his legs felt as if they were empty of bone, and his hands, oh my Jesus, his hands, they were broken, deformed in some way that if he were to examine right now, right this minute he might just scream himself all the way back to the hospital, he—

"Hey!" from outside. "Cops're coming, I called the cops! You can talk to them!" It was a woman; she was shrill, scared. What had been *happening* here?

It was easier to move, using those grotesque new fingers he plucked his way upright, plowed along—the room seemed big as a ballroom, he had been crossing this carpet forever—back to the bathroom, to shut the door hard behind, push the lock button and

the room was bloody. Shower curtain gone, stuffed in shreds and remnants down the toilet, each of the two drains, as if blocking egress; towels heaped red in the tub. The blow-dryer lay shattered like a rejected offering before the mirror, itself broken in one particular spot as if struck with immense force by something very dense and true.

In the mirror, he saw his face.

Blood and silver, one of his eyes was swollen shut. A corner of his mouth was twisted, hard, as if on purpose; as if by a stroke. Silver and blood from his nose, and most ominous, his ears. He could not bear to look again at his hands.

Russell seemed to be throwing up again, right by the door, irregular blurts and gobbles and in his mind no thoughts, nothing but a vast and empty sorrow.

Somebody knocking at the outer door.

The police held them overnight, or what was left of it; finally they were let go. Neither would press charges against the other and no one else had been involved; the police kept insisting it was a brawl and they would have to pay damages to the motel, but even as they insisted they kept looking, looking, most of all at Austen, bare-chested and one-eyed in a shirt thrown over the hunch of his shoulders. Hands in his armpits, mouth mournful as a clown. Russell looked worse, hair half on end and puke-smelling, eyes closed to a squint when he spoke as if it hurt to acknowledge the light; but

there was something irrevocably damaged about Austen, something broken; even the police could feel it.

"You better get some help, buddy.” In a revolted voice. "You’re the weirdest thing I’ve ever had to clean up.”

They were taken back to the motel to find that, after all, a shower curtain and a blow-dryer were replaceable. The mirror was undamaged; Austen remembered differently, remembered the wounded glass but said nothing. All in all it had just looked like Armageddon: the towels could be washed, the bedspread dry-cleaned. Or burned. Plastic bag in hand, "Here’s your stuff,” the desk clerk said, a different clerk than the night before; he seemed sorry to have missed the excitement, the crazy men who broke up a room. Russell took the bag. He still smelled horrible, even to Austen. "Just keep going,” the cop said. He had a ridge of fat under his hat’s low brim that made him look like he was scowling. "You wanna fight, do it somewhere else.”

The cop waited for them to get in the car before driving away. Quiet, Austen’s breath going in and out. His eye hurt very much. They had given him an aspirin in the police station. Now he dry-swallowed a Tegretol, wondering if it was even worth the bother anymore. Not many left, anyway; one less thing to worry about. He took the bag from the floor: no brushes, but his painting. Raising it up, normal hands now that ached as if each separate bone and twist of skin had been deliberately stretched and violated; but they had regained their shape and he was inexpressibly glad. Perhaps like the mirror they had never really changed at all.

Painting, in his hands.

Red, and a cold trench-green. Thick pewter color, almost black. Abstract at first but with each successive study a change, the emergence of a figure, still obscure but informed with a huge and omnivorous force: turned one way and another, different edges, facets presented to a different kind of light: the light that lives underground, forced under pressure like the rarest kinds of vapor, unstable.

"Listen.” Russell rubbing his face. "I feel like shit, I got to get cleaned up."

"Me too.” Mouth still bent, it was somewhat difficult to talk, to smile would be harder still but he did not feel like smiling at all. 'Think they’ll rent us another room?”

Russell glanced at him. "I feel like shit," he said, starting the car. "Did I say that already?" Another glance. "You look worse than I do. You okay?"

"Not really," the fat of his aching mouth, the warm blurry taste of mucus beneath.

They found a McDonald's, used the washroom, emerged like changed characters in a farce movie. Russell ate; Austen drank coffee, slowly through his clumsy lips; in the end he gave up and got a straw. 'Tomorrow," Russell said, a flutter of shredded lettuce clinging to his unshaven upper lip, "we're gonna stop for a while."

From several questions he asked the first. "What's tomorrow?"

"The day we stop."

Har har. "Why not today?"

"I got some stuff to do today."

"Like what?"

"Like go back and see Crystal."

"Who's Crystal?" but before the question was completely out he knew, the spike-haired woman at the bar. Straw-sucking at his coffee while Russell explained, he had talked to her, told her he would be back today.

"You talked to her for about twenty minutes total."

"So?" Smug. "An hour after I met Deanie she was sucking my dick." Long vacuum slurp on his drink, exaggerated sounds. "C'mon along, man. See how it's done."

Why not?

The coffee tasted slightly of blood.

Why not.

She called, she met him at the bar, KAROL'S windy parking lot; she honked the horn when Russell stepped out of the car. Brown leather jacket, stretch jeans, boots with one broken heel and she walked with a compensating polka gait. "Follow us," Russell yelled, and they took off.

Party store, grocery, TV repair place, and a small bank of apartments, two stories high; hers was a ground floor, on the outside of the square. Austen had to park across the lot. They left the door open for him.

She was saying something, high laugh like a cartoon character. Russell's voice sounded different, the drawl more pronounced. Maybe that was his outlaw persona, bad guy talking about his bruised face. When Austen walked in, cinnamon smell and uncertain, Russell had already

popped a beer. One hand massaging her hip. Her pink T-shirt said SEXY BITCHES HAVE MORE FUN.

"This is Austen," Russell said.

"Hi.” She had a big smile that showed all her crooked teeth. "I’m Crystal.” Russell’s hand found her breast and she squeaked like a squeeze toy. “There’s some beer in the fridge if you want.”

“No, thanks.” Greasy-looking red phone, visible in the kitchenette; on impulse he said, “Can I use your phone?” and the afterthought lie, "It’s a local call,” but it had already made sense to her or perhaps she was only tired of talking to him; she nodded, swiveling in Russell’s arms, they began to kiss. The movement of her mouth reminded him of his own new deformity, and, uneasy, he turned away; they were gone, then, back to the bedroom, he heard the determined snap of the door.

And his weariness, sitting at the ugly laminated table, one of the chairs was cracked. He took the intact scrap with Peter’s number, dialed.

Two rings. Four. Five, ready to hang up and Peter’s cross, "Hello?”

“Hi," ashamed somehow, his voice half there. "It’s Austen.”

"Austen,” with some new sound, it made him instantly sorry he had called. "Hey, what the hell happened to you, man? I called your mom’s, she said you were headed back home but that was—”

“Yeah, I know, I told her I was going home but that wasn’t, I mean I changed my mind.” Lies and abridgment and leaving out all the seizures, or hallucinations, or episodes, a good term, episodes, sanitary and vague, he brought Peter not up-to-date but to some spot where things were if not fine then at least artificially close to normal. It took a little while to do that, and still Peter seemed unsure.

“Where are you now?”

"Staying with friends.” Liar. "You want the number?” reading it off the phone with a calm that seemed, to his own ears at least, convincing.

"Listen,” again that flat new tone. “Something happened to your stuff.”

Little shrieks from the bedroom. The headboard against the wall. “What do you mean?" His voice louder, unconscious straightening of his spine, the best position to take a blow. "What happened?”

"It’s not damaged, or anything, or not really.” Austen did not speak. "It’s like, it’s—this is really hard to explain.” Hearing Peter’s breath over the line. "It’s like it *changed,"* reluctant, “all by itself.”

He closed his eyes. The phone felt newly strange in his hand, some appliance he had no idea how to correctly use. "I had it at the gallery, like we said, you know, and I put a piece in the show, you know, that sphinx show, *Nile?* The triptych with *Criosphinx.* And it was up with the rest of the pieces. And somebody said something about the colors looking different in different lights. And I started keeping track, and they were right, it was *changing,* Austen, I don't know what else to tell you, it was changing all by itself. I thought it was just the light, I thought," and he went on, artificial light, daylight, the positioning of the pieces, he finally rehung the whole show to try the triptych on every wall and it kept on changing.

"Changing how?" To himself Austen sounded as if he might faint. There was sweat on his forehead; his mouth felt leaden.

"Getting darker. The colors are intense, you know? But all darker, like somebody put black in, but not an overlay; I don't know how to explain it." Austen said nothing. "But listen to this, this is the wildest part," words rushing now, "somebody bought it! You know Laurence and Jeannetta? They're the car dealers, they have a— well anyway, it doesn't matter. But they fell in love with it, they couldn't stop talking about it."

"They bought *Criosphinx?*

"They bought the whole triptych. Large dollars," and Peter named a figure. Austen closed his eyes; when he opened them he was crying. Peter was still talking and he broke in: "I never told you you could sell it."

"What?"

"I said, I never said you could sell it! I said you could *hang* it, I said you —''

"Hey, Austen, don't start this kind of shit with me now, because you know and I know that—"

"I never said you could sell it!" Weeping, wet snot on his upper lip, he wiped haphazard with his sleeve. "I don't even know what's *happening* to it and you go and *sell* it to some fucking *car* dealers? What the fuck is the *matter* with you?"

"You are really something else, man, you know it?" Now Peter was yelling too. "I've been storing your fucking art free of charge all this time, and taking care of it, *good* care of it, and you *told* me I could hang it, I asked you and you said yes. Go on, you said. And now you're—"

He was crying too hard to talk, he mouthed with his ruined lips and gave up. Peter went on, on, finally slowed by the lack of response. "Are you

still there?” demanding, but worried too, as if the next sound he might hear would be a shot gun, Austen in the ultimate pique. “Are you still there?”

Whispering, "Yeah.” Wiping his face, his sleeve was soaked. There was a ratty-looking dish towel within reach; he used that. Eyes sore, as if the tears he had cried were copper blood. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” and he hung up, wiped his face again. Now he could hear from the bedroom the diluted sound of music, crummy guitar on bad speakers. After a few moments the door opened.

"What the fuck," said Russell, bare-chested, he looked sleepy and serene. "What’re you yelling about in here, man?" Behind him, Crystal in her T-shirt, bare ass beneath, her arms around Russell in a chummy backward hug.

"Friend of mine,” Austen said.

"Well, he didn’t sound like much of a friend,” Crystal’s pleasant disapproval, taking three beers from the refrigerator, placing one squarely on the table before him, a medication he must not ignore. ‘You’re just having a bad day,” she said. "You need to party a little, take your mind off it.”

Trying to meet her smile. Thinking of *Criosphinx*, changed and changing, thinking of not thinking at all and Crystal’s cheery determination, she was off work tonight, she would call a friend of hers, they would all have a party together. "Her name’s Shasta,” Crystal said. “She’s really nice."

“Austen’s nice, too,” Russell said; in the overhead light his unshaven face looked goatish and sly. "We’re all nice.”

They had to drive back to the bar to pick her up, because, Crystal said, squeezed thigh-to- thigh with Austen in the front seat, Shasta’s car was in the shop. "What kind of car’s she got?" Russell asked, and Crystal shrugged, well it wasn’t really her car, just this car that she used sometimes; boyfriend’s car, Austen knew, but did it matter? Crystal went inside to get her friend, plasticked hair unfazed by the spearing wind; Austen felt a momentary pang for his lip, his eye which still looked pulpy, but he did not want, in front of Russell, to look at himself in the mirror.

"Pretty,” Russell said, nodding at the door. He had his beer between his legs, now drank some, slow. "Didn’t I tell you we were gonna get laid this stop?”

“What about tomorrow?”

"What about it?” and Crystal was back, her friend in tow. Shasta. In a black vinyl coat that barely reached her thighs, bright makeup, smile as big and hearty as Crystal’s but with better teeth. Her hair was yellow. Austen slid out of the car, opened the back door for her; always the gentleman. "Hi,” she said, as if she were actually pleased to meet him, bending to climb into the backseat; through the zippered coat he could see the bob of heavy breasts and felt the quick insistent ripple of desire.

The women talked to each other all the way back; Russell played the radio. Austen, silent as a teenager, ashamed to admit that he did not know exactly what to do. What would happen when they got back to the apartment? Instant sex? Small talk? What? As they pulled into the apartment parking lot, Shasta lay one hand on his thigh, light and loose, and squeezed it gently; he placed his hand over hers; her touch was cold; she wore too many rings.

Radio, loud, and beer; the apartment felt too hot and still that cloying cinnamon smell. Can in hand, sitting on the sofa. Shasta unzipped her coat; beneath it she wore what seemed to be some sort of bra top, fake thin denim and fake satin bows, fake denim skirt to match. She sat very close to Austen. She told him she thought his name was neat, "just like the city!” and confided that once her daddy had taken her to Texas, a long time ago.

‘To visit my mom,” she said. Her eyes were solemn under makeup like an actress’s, a clown’s. “She had, like, heart cancer?” a bit unsure of her terminology, "and they have that heart institute down there. Specialists and everything, you know?"

‘Tve heard of it," he said; he had no idea what she was talking about. Her eyes were hazel. She kept touching him with cold hands, and talking, what did he do, she used to work at a restaurant, "You wouldn’t believe the creeps!” and her nod, fervent, it was awful, the shit you had to take for minimum wage. “I thought my daddy would have a heart attack when he found out I was dancing," Shasta’s hands on him, the twinkle of the satin bows, "but he just said, ‘Well you know best, and you can make a shitload of money if you play your cards right.’ And he was *right,"* emphatic, draining her beer. “I make ten times more money than I ever did at that stupid restaurant and I don’t have to put up with a whole lot of shit. Excuse me," rising to step past him, she tilted, a little, to avoid the coffee table; his hand out to steady her inadvertently touching her ass; warm, through the

skirt. Warm. Across the room Russell and Crystal had ceased talking; her leg half over him, his hands pulling and tugging her shirt.

Shasta, back from the bathroom, beers in hand for both of them and grinning at Russell and Crystal. "Excuse us," but they weren't listening, it was to Austen she spoke. He rose, put out his hand to take the beer from her and she kissed him, a fruity, oily kiss and he realized she had gone to the bathroom to put on more makeup.

Down the hall and the sheets on the bed were twisted, the whole room appallingly messy and close but she was sliding out of her skirt, panty hose but no panties, she had unsnapped the bra top, her nipples were a surprising chocolate brown. "You didn't get to see me dance, did you?" and he was shaking his head, no, standing stupidly by the door, holding his beer and she pushed him, lightly, in the chest: sit down.

There was a clock radio by the bed; the same tinny bleat he had heard earlier and she was dancing to it, eyes a little closed, palming her breasts so the nipples pointed straight at him, rolling her hips in an untutored grind. She began to sing, he did not know the song but the words were familiar: love, love. I can't make it without you. Still singing a little, but only to herself, she reached to unzip his jeans, humming, he was very hard, he did the zipper himself. In the nightstand drawer there were condoms; she fit one on him with the calm care of a shoe salesman, pulled him down to climb atop him. I'm not going to last, he wanted to say, but that fruity mouth was on his again, her tongue shooting in and out and her cold rings pressing on his shoulders, pressing, he rolled her over and in the rolling came, one long whisper through his sorry mouth, *oh* and she was still thrusting against him, hard little hips banging against gravity so he rolled over again, carefully, onto his back; her face was very serious, her eyes were closed. When she came she shuddered all over, like jumping into cold water, then opened her eyes with a big breathless smile as though on completion of a complex and spectacular trick.

So tired. "Mmm," and she kissed the side of his neck, "you feel good," and she wanted to talk, ask questions, about him, about Russell, Crystal says you guys got into some kinda trouble last night. Eyes closed, smiling a little at the idea of explaining what was by nature inexplicable; and he said no, it was nothing really, it was really no big deal.

His throat and mouth felt very dry. It was hard to drink with her on top of him that way. Flash memory, Emily in this position, holding out a china

cup of water: long tangles of hair, unsmiling as a goddess: drink; and beautiful, oh, in a way this girl could never be.

They lay for a while, radio still on and Russell knocking, "Hey, you guys," and Crystal saying something about switching places and whose bedroom was it anyway. Shasta rising, jaunty, and Austen following, quick into underwear as the door opened; glancing back at the bed, dark pink sheets and the semen smears darker, like blood. He could not imagine anyone wanting to climb into that bed but no one else seemed to mind. The women spoke to each other at the door, quick and a smile and Shasta motioning to him, the sofa was a halfbed, whatever that was, there were sheets in the closet.

More beer, more talk; about dancing, about tips, the guys who wanted to stick things down her G-string, the guys who yelled. She was much impressed to find he was an artist, even an artist that did not sell much, would he, she wondered, paint her picture? He had not eaten anything since McDonald's, a long time back and his stomach had an empty sour feel that the beer did not dispel. She told him what each of her rings meant: topaz for faith, tigereye for prosperity, gold for luck, rubies for love; she had two of those. Silver for "surprises," smiling, "but they're not really real. They're pretty anyway though, aren't they?" fingers splayed, three to a hand.

So tired, more than a little drunk. The sheets were a gaudy red-and-yellow pattern, a very ugly pattern edged in brown; against that field the beer cans were a cool silver. Silver; for surprises. 'They're very nice," he said, and found to his slow astonishment that he was hard again; she was not surprised, she was smiling. Her purse was by the sofa bed and from it she took a condom as, parting her thighs with his fingers, his touch traced the faint scaled spoor: strange delicate feel like the secret touch of papery wings, a soft and frozen moth.

He woke once in the night, his bladder outrageously full; returned to find her curled small and heavy in the center of the sofa bed, arms gathered around both makeshift pillows. Cracked mascara sprinkled under her eyes. Back into the warmth: it was good to sleep with a woman again, warm female body, sleep and dream for a nourishing moment that it might be, might be Emily again.

Morning; his eyes hurt, both of them, but his mouth was much improved. Sex as a cure-all, though it had not cured his hangover. The sound of the shower. The apartment otherwise empty, Russell's jacket gone.

He had spoken of doing something today; what was it? Was he off doing it now?

Shasta found him in the kitchen, peering through the refrigerator; she was towel-wrapped but already made up, eyes and all. She kissed him with shiny lips. “Crystal never has anything good to eat here,” she said. ‘They probably went out somewhere." A moment, then brightly, “You want to go out?”

“I, yeah, but maybe I better stick—”

“My treat,” as brightly, linking fingers with him; swing, swing. There were tiny drops of water on her shoulders.

“No, I—”

“Don’t worry, we’ll go to the Golden Harvest. Where I used to work? I know everybody there,” and it turned out she was right, she did know everybody and everybody knew her; they called her Shelly. “Shasta’s my *stage* name,” she stage- whispered, stirring her coffee; three creams, three sugars. “Hey, Janine!” loud and extravagant. “Janine’s the one I told you about,” and the woman waved back, heavyset, short black hair in a prison cut. Austen did not remember hearing about her, did not remember much past their second bout of sex; lots of talk, not all of it hers, lots of beer, and sleep finally. Janine served them and, lighting a cigarette, sat down beside Shasta.

"Janine, do you remember,” forking into her eggs, vigorous, spilling yolk, "the name of that preacher? The one Norrie went to?”

"It’s Dr. something,” blowing smoke. Leaning across the table, heavy breasts merged with heavy belly, dragging the soiled ashtray closer. “Dr. Prescott, I think. I can ask her if you want. Why?”

“Austen,” pointing with her fork, "needs to talk to someone.”

Austen could not have been more surprised if she had thrown her plate in his face. He could not think of the first thing he should say, denial, dismay, what the hell had he told her last night anyway? "He’s real good,” Janine said grimly. She put out her cigarette and hauled herself out of the booth, which seemed to rise at her departure. "Norrie got pregnant just like *that."*

“Is he in the phone book?”

Janine gone, Austen pushed aside his food, hands across the table and ready for a speech but she was ready for him: smiling, earnest hands on his. "Austen, it’s okay. You don’t have to be ashamed,” a little dribble of egg on

her lower lip. "It’s like going to church, is all. Except you pay when you go in.”

She ate, talked, wiping her plate with the toast rinds, explaining Norrie and Dr. Prescott and faith healing in general and in principle and finally he finished eating, slowly, everything tasting like grease and she was already by the phone, going through the Yellow Pages. Dialing. What is happening? Silent in his seat, did he owe her this? Ready to say something, wave her off but she saw him looking and smiled, her rings ashine in the slow angle of sunlight through the marred windows, smiled and gave him a thumbs-up. Sorting through the careful crumple of bills in his pocket, leaving a tip as he joined her in the dazzle, cold air and the afternoon sun.

“You don’t have to be ashamed," she said again; in this light she looked older, more insistent. "People get sick, that’s all, and—”

“I am not sick!” Yelling. He had not meant to yell. "I’m not sick and I’m not crazy and I’m not going to any fucking faith healer, okay? Okay?”

"Austen?” she said, and he walked past her, slippery crusts of snow beneath his feet on the way to the car. Her car. Boyfriend’s car, boyfriend’s girl, he had no business with any of it, none. She was following, silent; she knew when to be silent. Starting the car, backing up slow, Austen beside her with one hand cold over his eyes.

"Do you want,” she knew when, too, to be careful, "to go back to Crystal’s place?”

"Sure,” tired, the anger fading inexplicable, it wasn’t her fault he was an asshole. The apartment was still empty. Maybe Russell had decamped, car and Crystal and gone. Shasta, spare key carefully rehung, nudging a beer against his hand, “Getting low,” and he did not understand, he felt sick to his stomach, Golden Harvest meal like leaden flesh and when he looked to Shasta he saw breasts, panties falling, she was already almost naked. Her one response, but who was he to criticize, he had certainly taken everything she offered and was taking it now, hard for her now, bending her over the couch and her thighs like meat in his hands, he felt sick and his head was buzzing, the latex smell of the condom like some hideous cheap perfume. She made little sounds, words but he barely listened, gripping her haunches, slit-eyed glance from moment to moment at the thumping bob of her breasts and he didn’t think because he was sick of thinking, he was sick and he was tired and absurdly he was coming, already, all the staying power of a fifteen-year-old but he didn’t want to think about that either. Collapsing

against her, hardly able to stand upright and gazing for the first time on his painting, the new one, propped jaunty on the slick of the TV cabinet, had Shasta set it there? Had he? No memory. Silver for surprise.

Shasta silent, kneeling on the sofa and he slumped damp and dizzy beside her, "I have to sit down for a minute." Headache gathered behind his eyes, what Cyndee used to call a sick headache, partnered with nausea warm as soapy grease. The whole room smelled warm, unfresh, like dirty clothes left too long in a suitcase, stuffed under a bed, less mold than the peculiar ashy smell of soiled skin. Shasta's stiff hair on his shoulder, pants around his ankles like an idiot in a movie and the door opening, he had not heard the key at all, Shasta's head rising like an inquisitive pet and Russell saying, "Come on in," and in answer a woman's voice, not Crystal's: quick, a little hoarse, completely self-assured: "So where is he?"

Emily.

8

Scream, laugh, turn red, run out of the room, no notion what to do and he stared at her, heart frantic in his chest, then frantic, too, his fingers zipping up, almost catching hair in the zipper, limp moist flesh and she came around to his side of the couch, sat chummily beside the still-naked Shasta.

"He doesn't look sick," to Russell, wide mouth unsmiling, tone that cool neutral that could go either way. Black jacket styled like a man's, coarse brown shiny hair pulled back in some complicated knot. Long hands on knees; no rings. Shasta, sullen swipe of shirt descending, she could not have missed Austen's spectacular panic: dressing slow: "Who're you?"

"I'm Emily Bandy," and Austen's distracted wonder, grateful, she had kept his name after all.

Even in this stupidity he was almost unbearably happy to see her; her presence took up the whole room. Standing, wanting to touch her, to hug her, do something, instead he finished dressing, buttoning his shirt and looking up to see her looking at him.

"Come here for a minute," swiveling to Russell, she had a different look now and they went down the hall, Austen heard Emily's fierce murmur, strained for more but Shasta, fretful, touching him, wanting to know if he was coming to watch her dance, he had promised, he *said.*

"I can't," barely hearing her, Emily was saying something about collect calls and Shasta turning away, picking up panties and purse, past him and, alone in the room for that moment he tried to think, where, how had she come here to this place, and oh to come at this particular moment, fresh from fucking; must everything be for him some variant of a slapstick tragedy? God. And still so very beautiful; so terrible and dear.

Now back in the room and he wiping at his hair, pushing it into some kind of place and her brisk beckon, let’s go. Outside air inside and his scramble for coat, shoes, cellular imperative to keep her in sight, quick cough of her starting car and she tapped the horn, some maroon box still warm inside.

"So where’s for coffee?" clipped cutoff smile, palming the wheel. Idiot temptation, how about the Golden Harvest? but he said something about fast-food places and then the question, uncontrollable: "How did you know where I am?”

"Just like a movie, isn’t it?" but she wasn’t smiling now. "Well, your friend back there’s very worried about you and he just wouldn’t let me alone. Have you ever been harassed by a total stranger? It’s a unique experience," serene through a red light, “at first I thought of calling the cops. But he kept on saying that magic word.”

He was afraid to ask what the magic word was. Sunglasses he had never seen before, heavy and black like a cop’s or a movie star’s. Her earrings were slivered tines of some artfully tarnished metal, dark against the long pale line of her jaw. ‘There’s a McDonald’s," unnecessary, she already had her signal on. Parking, she was out so fast, he wanted a minute’s privacy but she was halfway across the lot, he had forgotten how fast she walked.

Coffee, hot and boiled. His hands were shaking; he lay them like unruly pets on his lap but she had already seen, she knew. “Listen,” grave now, her hands flat, no more fooling. "That guy’s a bullshit artist, I know, but you really don’t look good, Austen, not at all. What’s going on with you?”

Oh the scene, the wonderful scene just as he had pictured it or close enough, and the saga stuck like a large and annoying lump of phlegm, he even coughed a little. "Well," and the worst possible beginning, swallow, swallow, wet eyes, oh for God’s sake you asshole, you *asshole* but she was ahead of him again, changing the subject, well then tell me later and leaning back, seamlessly onto what she was doing nowadays, writing feature stories for a local magazine, it was basically monkey work but for some strange reason it paid moderately well. Plus she was still doing her famous sideline specialty, career counseling.

"It’s the biggest joke in the world,” dissatisfied smile, “but people seem to like it. It even works,” inviting his wonder but he could not fully look at her and she seemed to see that too. Drinking her coffee in the pause, long

and growing worse and he blurted it out, I was in an accident, I had some, I had neurological problems. I still have them.

Narrowed eyes at once, coffee forgotten, ‘That’s what he said. Your friend. He said you have epileptic seizures too. Is that true?”

“Not epileptic. They’re called temporal-lobe seizures, but it isn’t that anymore either.”

"What is it then?”

“It’s worse now.”

"Worse how?”

For this he must look at her. "I see things.” She didn’t understand. Why should she? “Not hallucinations,” carefully, for her it must be purely understood, nothing at all but all the truth. "Bad things. Sometimes I, sometimes they get—I hurt Russell,” blurting it out, "I almost crashed the car. He said I tried to kill him. Then we—*I* wrecked this motel room. They put us in jail overnight.”

She did not speak. In the booth behind her two girls laughed; one threw a sugar packet at the other, missed, threw another. "Have you seen a doctor?" Her voice was flatter, this was perhaps not exactly what she had expected, how long did he have before she left the booth, the restaurant, left him again with his mouth open like a frog on the dissecting table, bare before the inevitable knife? He tried to say he was sorry, it was not his idea, none of it but she wasn’t listening, she didn’t want to hear about that now.

“Have you seen a doctor.”

"A lot of doctors.”

"Neurologists?”

"Yeah, neurologists, and specialists, and GPs, and a quack, I have a file that's six fucking inches thick,” and the girls behind Emily stopped throwing sugar, sucked their straws in listening silence. Emily herself was silent, that special grim stare that said oh really? "I’ve done everything I can think of, I can’t think of anything else.”

Measured, filtered through the stare: "How about a psychologist?”

“I’m not crazy.”

She let that pass. "What are you going to do, then? What do you want me to do?"

'You don’t have to do anything at all as far as I’m concerned. None of this was my idea." Frail stir of the coffee, the plastic stick bowed in his fingers. He had not yet considered that aspect of her sudden genie-like

appearance, Russell's bland duplicity; all along, with every mystic turn, every bullshit slick leading up to this. Perhaps it would have helped had he not been so easy to fool, but whose fault was that. "According to Russell—”

"According to Russell you’re three-quarters crazy already. Where did you hook up with him anyway?"

Here it comes. "At my mother’s.”

"You went to see Cyndee?" Amused despite her anger, gunshot gaze leveling a little; Cyndee had never been a favorite but as comic relief she was priceless. "You must be desperate.”

"Well, I am,” refuge in her thaw, a little; a little. "I met him down there while I was visiting her."

“Is he a friend of hers?”

“Well, no, not really." Go on. "I met him in a bar.”

“A bar?"

"That’s right.” *You’re* not my mother, don’t look at me that way. Uneasiness like prickling ants, but still he kept her gaze, held his head straight, he could do at least that much.

"You met him in a bar in Texas and now he’s running your life.”

“He is not running my life, he’s just—’’

“Well, *he* says he is, he says you’re pretty much out of it most of the time and that somebody has to watch out for you and drive the car and pay the bills. With what, I don’t know. He doesn’t look exactly solvent.’’

Someone else’s bank card; Cyndee’s loan. “We get by."

“That’s good. That’s good news, because it means you don’t need me at all and to tell you the truth, Austen," her voice getting lower, harder, a look in her eye as if she viewed him from a distance he could never cross again, “I don’t like any of this. I don’t like being tricked into coming here, I don’t like—”

"Hey, I didn’t—”

"No, you never do, do you? That’s how it always is with you," and her tone a flashbulb memory to the dreary roundelay of their old arguments. The girls in the booth behind had gone, no one near but a thin disconsolate teenager slowly sweeping crumbs. “Well, I’m not going to pull you out of whatever shit you’re in, I don’t owe you that. I don’t owe you anything.” Harsh, "We’re not married anymore, we’re not *anything* anymore. We’re not even friends. And I really resent being dragged into this by some bullshitting con man you dug up in some crummy bar, and hearing all kinds

of stories about how you're disintegrating by the minute and I'm the only one who can save you, I don't *need* that, Austen. You're not on my conscience anymore and that's how I want to keep it."

Her coffee gone in two long swallows, closing her purse, gestures of finality, he had seen them before and in the seeing felt as he did now, the sick folding feeling like the cringe before the blow.

"If you're sick," trying, he could see it, to be calm, to speak calmly, "you should go to a doctor."

"I've been to doctors."

"A psychologist then, there are clinics that charge what you can pay. In fact there's one—"

"I already told you, I'm not crazy. You have to—"

"I don't have to do anything, except drive you back to your girlfriend's place. And don't start," over his open mouth, an objection she would not entertain, "I don't care what she is, it's none of my business, thank God." And for him a moment's chagrin, poor Shasta, he had forgotten her so thoroughly; you *said;* he had said a lot of things.

Slipping keys from a jacket pocket, sunglasses back like some device to sharpen vision, to see more clearly, inside and out. Could she see inside of him, now? "Let's go."

The ride back seemingly swift, over before it started, she never looked at him once. How had they fought so effortlessly, all the old bad habits as if no time at all had passed? And must he be punished for those old unlost sins? Losing her again and twice precious in the echo, all about her like the aura of a saint the slow-fashioned nimbus of his frustration and desire. Now, encore paused on the cusp of leaving, his hungry urge to weep, to say he was sorry, to *be* sorry. He did none of it; none of it would do any good.

She parked carelessly, Austen stepping out before the engine was off. He did not slam the door. He did not want to look again at her, not fully, nor think or speak till she was gone. Into the apartment, door thoughtfully open; Russell alone on the sofa with a beer in easy reach and he hopped up at once, pins and needles: "Well?" with a smile, anticipation soured by the Gestapo tenor of Emily's entrance, and Austen sad and startled, he had not expected her to follow him in. Don't let's drag this out, but that thought died as he saw she had come only to settle up with Russell, she did not mean to speak to him at all.

"I need to talk to you, asshole," standing so close before Russell at the sofa that he could not rise to meet her without physically pushing her back. Hands loose before her like a gunslinger, wide lips down. "You lied to me."

"How did I lie?" shifting sideways so he was not staring straight up at her, not so much innocence as injured dignity. You lied to me, too, but Austen would not say it, in fact he would not stay in this room. Down the hall, absurd, hiding like a child in the bathroom, behind closed doors. On the sink a used pink washcloth, fat- backed brush with missing bristles, stray hairs. He heard Russell's voice, raised in defense, half logic and more lies: Austen's *sick*, man! I'm not making it up! when the truth was, he was both sick and tired, and in fact sick and tired of all the people who knew what he should do. He had been rude to poor Shasta, when really they were all proponents of their own particular religion, Shasta's faith in the faith healer and Emily's psychology and Russell's father-worship, all the way back to the doctors at the hospital and their consuming faith in Tegretol and CT scans; no one seemed struck as he with the sheer sick wonder of the episodes, the fact that they were beauty as well as dread. The fact that he had seen these things with his own eyes, his own *eyes* and no hallucination about it, no projection, no nothing: it *was* and it was *real* and he had seen it. And no matter the cure or moment would see it again.

Maybe now.

There? Twinkle in the corner by the shower curtain, wrinkle of plastic as he pulled it back and the moldy oasis, hair in the drain and a hundred bottles of shampoo and *there*, slippery against the liverish paint, that overlay elegant smear: showing so little this time. Just enough. Long sketch of limbs and he remembered the dream of vast elongation, dreaming of the road to Cyndee's and even now it stretched, became not more dense but wider, skimming the surface of the ceiling with the innate delicacy of a web. And he below it, mouth open, as it began with perfect accuracy to rain drops upon his face.

His forehead, like the oil of knowledge, an anointing and a drop near his mouth, his open lips, two, three and it seemed to dry on contact like a medicine, like paint, a drop directly in his eye, his right eye and it clouded at once, he could not see more than shapes and a form

grinning at him through the cast, the caul of liquid, grinning with incredible mirth, precise and elemental, framework not of bones but what informs the bones, not the skull but its thoughts

and all its thoughts so black

and at once slammed back against the door with such force that it knocked his wind out, ah ah ah like a fish, bug-eyed too and it slammed him again, he used his left eye to see and saw the drops on hands and face were not silver at all but brown, like dried blood, old blood, and it slammed him again and he heard something crack, hoping it was the door, the wood of the door and Emily's voice on the other side yelling his name, "Austen!" and she was strong, trying to force the door and the vision in his right eye disappeared completely, "Austen!" and Russell's grunts, when they pushed at the door it was as if they were pushing out his bones, he tried to tell them to stop but through the one eye left to him he saw unendurable beauty, all over the room, walls, floor, the toilet, everywhere, the dirty sink runic with mad glyphs so intricate that they formed, oh, yes, the face at the heart of silver

and it slammed him again

very hard.

"—ought to be swelling up." Russell talking, loud, panicky, worse than when they almost crashed. "There's a mushy spot at the back of his head though, you can see the—"

"I see it." Emily, her voice hoarse. Emily was still there. Was it her hands touching him? He barely felt it. He opened his eyes.

"Austen," yes, her hands. Trembling hands. "Just lie still, okay, we're going to call an ambulance, we're—"

No.

Trying to shake his head, "No," trying to sit up. "Don't. I'm all right."

Russell, still loud, "You're not all right, your head is—''

"Fucked up, I know. Not bad though," touching it, blood and hair. "It doesn't hurt, even." That was a lie but not much of a lie, it really didn't hurt that much. "Just, I just want to lie down a little bit. On the sofa," vertiginous smile and Emily's arm around his waist, raising him up. Halfway to the sofa his vision blanked, he saw nothing, not even blackness, just a warm moist gray but he did not speak, Emily on one side, Russell on the other, if I can just lie down for a minute, just a minute.

When he was stretched out flat he felt better, towel rolled beneath his head to sop the blood, not much blood now. "Looks like you split your scalp some," Russell said, and back from the bathroom Emily, grim,

‘There’s blood all over the door.” Clean washcloth, bending to him, her hands were still shaking and he wanted to say, Relax; it’s not that bad, it could have been a lot worse, it could have been

silver, the washcloth, heedless she laved him with silver and he tried to push at it, get *away* but she didn’t know, couldn’t see and now over his face and *he* could see, inside, in the cheap washcloth weave that pitiless elegance like fingers crooked to summon the headman, the cloth all the world and over him like the cold ziggurat of heaven’s ether, silver spread like oil across his face, coating his lips, into his nostrils and crawling livid down his throat and an understanding, flushing his body like blood, that it had always been there, it was more a part of him than hunger, than need, than the steady drum of respirating lungs, it *was* respiration, it was air, his air, breathe it or die.

The cloth unmoving over his face.

Breathe it or die.

Emily’s voice, ragged, he opened his eyes and had perfect vision in both. The back of his head hurt as if he had been struck by a baseball bat; neck aching too but that was from the uncomfortable position, head canted back against her thighs, half on her lap; she had jammed a spoon in his mouth, holding down his tongue, it made him want to puke. Twisting his head protestingly against her touch and, looking down, she saw his eyes alive again, removed the spoon at once.

“We got to get out of here.” Russell, grabbing jackets, scuffing hasty into shoes. "Crystal’ll be back pretty soon.”

Emily’s tears seemed a thing apart; her hands were steady as she wiped at his face, tissue and the washcloth gone, a new ragged leak in his breathing: the drowning bubble. He said nothing, gazed to see his blood on the lapel of her jacket, an unpleasant rabbit-shaped smear. Shifting legs, a little, beneath him, and she said, "Who’s Crystal? That bimbo who was here before?”

“No," distracted, "her friend. This’s her place. Listen, I’ll clean up the bathroom real quick but we gotta go. Why don’t you—”

"Why don’t you shut up, I don’t need you to do any thinking for me.” The silence of enemies between them. “Just help me get him into the car.”

They laid him on the backseat, Russell folding his arms and he felt absurdly like a corpse, a grinning dead man. Emily back, starting the car,

Russell yelling something and she drove away, ignoring him.

“I don’t give a shit what that asshole says,” tense, she almost missed the stop sign at the end of the parking lot. “I’m taking you to a hospital.” Hollow from his fabricked slab, "I don’t have any insurance,” and she didn’t bother to turn her head, ignoring him too. Why not.

The hospital was called Mercy Community, which seemed an appropriate name. He sat, dizzy and apparently still bleeding, on a huge fake leather sofa with cushions the size of sidewalk squares while Emily argued with a young white man behind a counter, whose dry indifference finally yielded to her increasing rage. A gurney was produced, and he was taken off by a fat nurse with rainbows on her badge and squeaky shoes; she smelled deliciously of coffee, sweet coffee very hot.

"You smell great,” head stiff in the harness, strapped to prevent further injury and never mind that he had spent the last twenty minutes sitting upright in a waiting room. "You got any coffee around here?”

“What happened to you?" Looming destination, her professional interest or maybe just a way to pass the time. He told her he lost a fight with a door but she had seemingly ceased to listen, perked up again only when he asked, “No MRI?"

"We don’t have one,” she told him, then, curiously, "You been through this before?” Reuniting at last with Emily, X rays hot off the press and the doctor spoke to her first, ignoring him; why not. He heard her say something about a staff psychologist; the doctor’s shrug dismissive: he didn’t care about shrinks, he wanted to get at those X rays. The long pressed sigh of Emily’s impatience; teeth on lip but saying nothing for now.

Russell was there, too, apparently engrossed in a fascinating conversation with a woman in a red headwrap and sandals; she looked straight at Austen when they wheeled him into the waiting area, just a chair now, they needed the gurney for other, sicker riders. Her eyes were a long and curiously empty brown.

Russell claimed him from the attendant, pushed him briskly to where the woman sat. ‘This is Austen,” he said to the woman, who looked at him with those empty eyes and said, hand out, "My name is Mrs. Olivia. You want to come see me, you can.”

Lost, he looked instinctively to Emily, but she was closeted with Medical Science, jabbing a finger at the X rays and he left alone with magic, herb doctors, faith healing for the faithless. He shook her hand,

brown and soft, the unpolished nails so long, they curled over a little at the edges. Fancy jeans, bows at the ankles, and dirty old tire-rubber sandals, who wears sandals in cold like this?

"Your friend says you have a lot of problems," she said, uninterested. "He says you see things. I see things too, but I see *for* people, you just see for yourself. Right? Right. So you come see me."

She smelled like cigarettes, dry. "What for?"

"Help you, you want," shrugging. "Doctors can't help you. Doctors don't help anybody."

"Then why are you here?" and Russell frowned, big notifying frown but Mrs. Olivia only shrugged again.

"My sister," she said. "Cut herself. Slicing up a chicken and almost cut off her thumb."

"Which one?"

"Right one," but she smiled, his nonsense had pleased her. "You pro'ly smarter than you look, right? 'Cause you look pretty dumb."

"No," fallen into her clipped rhythms, "dumber. Dumber than I look."

Russell's frown even more extravagant: Emily behind. Her hands on the wheelchair. "Let's go," and backing up, Mrs. Olivia receding unperturbed, Russell rising quick and resentful and out into the parking lot; Austen choosing the front seat this time, Emily helping him strap in.

"I'm not taking you home," at once, Russell asking through the window then where the fuck're we going and Emily's snarl, how about a motel, big spender, you up for that? Huh?

"I'll split it with you."

"You can sleep in the fucking car for all I care," glaring at each other, Emily toeing the gas as if she might drive over him and Austen possessed at once of a weariness so huge it took his breath to nothing, did he faint? He was unsure. It ended the discussion anyway; he woke on a cool burgundy spread, before him a sunburst of badly rendered peonies on a gold field. Motel. Emily sitting with closed eyes in an equally burgundy chair.

"Hey," softly, in case she was sleeping, but if she was, she woke at once, rose to stand over him.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." His head hurt outrageously, new black stitches. "I'm fine."

"Good," reaching for her purse. "I'm going out to get something to eat."

And gone. Just like that.

Maybe twenty minutes and Russell, back from his dinner, six-pack furtive in hand: “She gone?" and then at Austen’s nod unbagging it, popping one for each. "Man, what a bitch. How long were you married to her anyway?”

"Not long enough.” Shifting on the bed, careful resettling of the painting, a miracle its survival but there was damage, scratches or something around the perimeter of the image; he had tried to paint but found the smell made him too dizzy to see at all, made his breathing, already half labored, weaker still. "Sit down, all right? I want to talk to you."

Legs crossed on the edge of the chair; he smelled like grease, greasy food and beer; a self- pitying swallow. "Oh shit, not you too.”

"Hey, she’s got a right to be pissed off." Sitting straighter, the better to do battle. “You lied to us both, Russell."

"What was I supposed to do, ask? You would never’ve let me do it, and I told you, I had to have a third hand.”

“What for?”

Loud, “Because I’m scared, that’s why. I’m not supposed to admit it, right? You try living with you for a while," looking down, away. "Half the time you’re a fucking madman."

‘Then why don't you bail out?”

“I can’t." Angry now. "I can’t!"

“Right." Can’t: not from caring or concern, his bitter smiling knowledge, what was begun with Horace might for Russell be finished with him instead. "Because you have to see how the freak show ends, right?”

‘Think whatever the hell you want. And while you’re thinking," with his own bitterness, “why don't you think about who it was saved your ass in that parking lot, and when you almost wrecked the car, and when you were trying to bite my fucking head off and all the other times. You think about that for a while.”

Silence. Austen tilting the portrait, spill of diffused light and seeing, again, things he had not intended, if he had intended any of it at all. In another mood he might have laughed. Or screamed. Russell turned on the television, beer after sullen beer and Austen, hungry now, empty all the way down, careful on the thin pillows not to press the leaky stitches and lying still, portrait beside him; sleeping, finally, a brief thin sleep that ended with

Emily’s return: loud, rattling bags in hand and a smell like burned sugar and meat.

“Here,” slapping the bags down on the night- stand, turning on the light between the beds. "Dinner." Bending to him, brusque examination of the eyes beneath the lids, checking his pupils for telltale dilation. She smelled lightly of food but below that the scent of her flesh, the smell that *was* Emily; a filling breath so long it hurt his liquid lungs and made him hard: brute conjure by force of smell, memories of that scent on his hands, in his mouth, did she know what he was thinking? Did she remember too?

“The doctor says,” sitting down on the other bed, staring at him, but before she could continue Russell’s slur, “Check out the filing system, babe, the doctors’ve said a whole lot of shit. A *whole* lot of shit,” mumbling, and Austen's rueful concurring nod at the file in question, stuck in a grocery sack printed with a grinning bear with farmer’s hat and hoe: “I told you, I went to a *lot* of doctors.”

Wordless she retrieved it, sat legs crossed on the bed to read, all of it; as Austen sat up, grunting a little from the sticky pain of his head, opened the paper bags to find tiny cartons and foam bowls. Clumsy plastic spoon, scraping everything clean. The TV changed from sports to news. Emily set the file aside, marked by one chart turned sideways. "I want to ask you something," changing her position a little, shifting as if her back was sore. "What happened in the bathroom? In that woman’s apartment?"

Uncomfortable, her regard so pure and purely stern. He did not want to look away, did not want to hold that gaze. “I, I saw it. I saw what I always see.”

"How’d you hit your head? Were you convulsing?”

"I didn’t hit it.”

"Austen, you have nine stitches in your—"

"I know it’s hurt, that’s not what I meant. I meant I didn’t do it to myself."

The TV, chummy banter, the hiss of another beer. Emily, leaning forward, palms turned out in unconscious supplication: tell the truth. “You were in there alone, Austen. There wasn’t anybody else.”

"I know.”

Her gaze turned sad, back to the paperwork, looking up once more to say, "Are you even taking your medication the way you’re supposed to?”

but instead of answering, of defense, he turned the new portrait to face her, let it lie like a small sun to touch her in its own time; and closed his eyes.

He slept, mouth maybe dry with food, he did not know; its onset was so all-consuming. Waking to find Emily, fully clothed down to her shoes, curled on the bed across, its distance chasmlike only in his regard; Russell asleep in two chairs pulled sloppily together, breathing harshly through his mouth. Austen felt unable to breathe fully, unable to stretch those flat unwilling sacs to suck what they needed. In the chilly bathroom he drank water, and water, man at a stream, running over his mouth in its fullness and lush chlorine. There was a tiny clock inset in the wall beside the built-in tissue dispenser: three forty-nine.

Think of it: Emily, sleeping in the same room with him. He almost stumbled, staring at her, she slept in that same peculiar fetal soldier's crouch, touch her and she would likely whip upright like a sprung trap: hah! Hair thick and messy, that long martial chin softened now in unconsciousness and there were no new lines, distinguishing marks graven by worry or sorrow; she was if changed at all then for the better. Their time apart had obviously been good for her, and was there anything sadder than that? Of course she did not think of it as time apart; he had become something permanently excluded, he was no longer part of the line that was her life.

Austen sat on the bed, facing her, cold feet spaced firmly apart on the knurled plastic carpet, and wept without sound, laboring, the tears so warm on the motionless planes of cheek and chin, of lips that would not speak. Emily, Emily. Emily Bandy, what did it mean that she had kept his name? Nothing? Nothing. Perhaps it was simply easier, no records to change, no driver's license to remake. Maybe it was the only part of him she could bear to keep, a neat and painless souvenir. Maybe she just liked it better than her maiden name, Moffett. Little Miss Moffett, she had hated *that,* all right.

He fell asleep like that, sitting up until he slumped and fell, a soft crash and he slept on, darkness, as across the trio of slumbering bodies, intricate and swift, ran silver, the memories of pain yet to happen and sorrow still unborn like the sweeping light of the mirrored ball over an antique dance floor, bright freak luminosity; underwater teeth of sharks, the considering edge of a knife; spinning the silent sanctus of what is, the cold totality of eater and eaten and the monstrous drift of bones between a bridge, vast and

delicate monument to the sad capacity, vast itself, for the deadly sin of ironic disbelief.

In the morning everyone was crabby, Emily swearing in the bathroom, she had no clean clothes to change into, Austen reflecting the same in silence. Russell had a headache, and a stomachache, and a plan for the day that made Emily shout from the bathroom, out and throttling her towel, long shirt misbuttoned in hurry to refute, their monotonous argument argued again.

Closing the door, wiping the mirror. Brushing his hair. Hesitating, he did not wish at once to walk into their quarrel, but the strange inevitability he had felt so often, driving, with Russell, came back like déjà vu; there was an end to this road. Not something he could sufficiently communicate, but did he have to communicate to convince? And did convincing matter? It was his brain, after all.

Emily had lowered her voice, an infinitely bad sign. Standing beside the bed, purse in hand, “All right,” with that pseudo-calm, "I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll just bow out right now and you can keep on with your little dog-and-pony show without me, all right? You can take him to faith healers, or witch doctors, whatever superstitious bullshit you have in—”

“It is not bullshit! Is everything you can’t see bullshit? What about the people who—”

“Austen,” turning to his entrance, chain-lightning appraisal bringing a faint frisson, oh she was smart, Emily, it was hard to put anything past her. Even things she couldn't see. "Austen, Russell here thinks the medical profession has nothing left to offer you, and that it’s time to try the eye-of-newt method. Frankly I’m against the whole thing, but it's up to you. Isn’t it?”

"Austen, man, she’s twisting—”

He raised his hands, both silence and ward, Wait a minute. Burning in his chest, as if he had inhaled fire. There was no way to say what she wanted to hear. “Emily," slowly, "I can’t go to any more doctors."

“Fine,” instantly, exactly what she had expected. "Then good-bye. I’m not sticking around for the bitter end, and don't call me from the hospital, all right, Austen, will you just not call me from the emergency ward? Or you either," scornfully, barely glancing Russell’s way. “I’m willing to

admit you've got some problems, but you're not going to solve them like this. So don't call me anymore, all right?"

"Emily, you—"

"I said *don't call* me!" tearing into her coat. He saw her hands shake and felt their tremor more fully than the pain in his lungs, sorry and unbearable, again his failure had hurt her. "Leave me the hell alone from now on, Austen, I mean it! And if *you* call me, asshole," gunsight finger at Russell staring cool across the room, "I'm going to call the cops so fast and when I do I'm going to *lie*, got that? Got it?"

"Why don't you just go, if you're going?" and Austen, powerless, he could not bring himself to submit, even for her, to more of what he knew was at best only trouble and expensive delay, at worst a stick to stir the muck into a vortex perhaps unbearable; he was sure of little, but sure enough to know that was not the way to find an end. He raised a hand, futile in the motion, but she was already leaving, she was already out the door.

She did not slam it. He had not expected she would.

"Don't worry, she'll be back.''

Russell, nod superior behind sunglasses, eating the second of a pair of chili dogs commendable only for their stupendous cheapness; the onions were black as scabs. "I'm telling you, man. You don't believe me, but I'm right."

Austen said nothing. He had hardly spoken since Emily's morning departure; the silence of amputation. Midafternoon, and the long gleam had turned him almost stupid to the eye in his mute gloom, hunched now in the front seat of his car which smelled, after Emily's car, much like the inside of a dumpster, yeasty and moist. "I want to find a Laundromat," he said.

"Why?" Through chili.

"I'm sick of being dirty, that's why." His own untouched food before him, dark chili clotted to the paper tube, sacrificial organs, twist-tie skin. Pushing it across the dusty dash to Russell, "I don't want this," unable to eat, to think clearly; work was what he wanted, the dogged visceral thrill. Maybe he would decide to fix those scratches, or not; perhaps they were in some way necessary. Perhaps there was in everything a state more necessary than he knew, could know. Perhaps he was an idiot; no, that was certain.

"Listen," Russell, mouth full, 'Im'na check out this lady, all right?" Swallow; grin. "See what she's all cracked up to be. You want to go back to the room?"

"Yeah. I'm going to work for a while."

"Might as well," starting up the car. "We're paid up till tomorrow." On the window, slight fog of breath or steam, transient, a finger could smear it to nothing, to droplets, each as small and sad as silly tears.

Inside, the room, he imagined, still smelled of Emily. He touched the made-up bed where she had slept, slipped the pillow from beneath the ugly spread to sniff, the unmistakable remnants of her scent actual pain, a pain in his chest, he had to put the pillow down.

And took up the painting, took it to the window where he could examine it, spill of voluptuous light across its deeps. It was good work, amazing through the chaos but it was; very good work. Hectic, a quality about it; a breathlessness and he had to smile at that. Breathless, all right. He decided to leave the scratches as they were. There were only a few tubes of paint available, black and heavy green; stupidly, he had not taken the rest from the car's backseat. Well then. Work with what you have.

And did: before the window, not in the glare but its paler reflection, simple slow dab and stroke, darker, darker, heavy as wet flesh and the scratches somehow more luminous, more simple and simply cruel. He worked for a long time, and did not notice time; or the gassy ache of his empty stomach; or his breathing, slow misfiring hitch; or the tender peep of silver from behind the bathroom door.

Knocking, impatient and hard, Russell's key lost? and he rose, surprised at the stiffness of his legs; he saw the light gone outside, the lights of the room on, perhaps he had worked himself into that place where there was nothing else to see. Hand loose on the door, opening without looking.

Emily.

"I talked to Peter," without preamble, dumping her purse on the nearest bed. "—Is that asshole gone? Good," then, seeming to see at once Austen's bewilderment, "Are you working?" with surprise. "I can—"

"No, I can take a break, I've been at it a while," capping his tubes, shy to let her see what he was doing. Back to her, the only way he could say it aloud, "I didn't think you were coming back."

"I didn’t think so either," but smiling, a very little. "But I talked to Peter about an hour ago, and he changed my mind.”

"Peter?” Such a cartoon face that Emily laughed, they both knew she had never respected Peter’s opinions about anything. "How could—"

“He told me about your selling the triptych,” and his face closed, tight like biting down and Emily, impatient, "I don’t want to talk about that, I know you think it’s some big catastrophe but—”

“You’re right.” Brushes, shivering in his hand. "Let’s don’t talk about it.”

“All right. Fine. Anyway I talked to Peter, who apparently called you at your girlfriend’s house—”

"I told you before—”

"I know, I know. Whatever. He’s been looking for you, he said he even left a couple messages on my machine."

"What does he want?” Brusque; scared.

“He said it isn’t just the triptych. It’s all of them. They’re all changing.”

Nothing. The brushes abruptly still.

"At first I thought he was just being stupid,” showing him her own path to belief without knowing what he knew, the shortcut, fierce, “but then I thought, This is *Peter*, he has no imagination whatsoever, he couldn’t be making this up. He told me,” face worked into a deeper frown, trying to quote word for word, "the textures are all changed. He said, I can’t remember exactly— no, wait,” at his predictable grab for the phone, “he’s not there anymore, he’s going down to the gallery. I said you would call him there.”

All changed; how? In what way? Disintegration? Lush spectacular decay? All of it running wild silver like an uncared-for sore? His breathing slipped a notch, a higher whine like a working transmission. "Was, did he say how?”

"He doesn’t know how. He doesn’t know if it’s permanent, he says the changes are so subtle that sometimes he’s not even sure anything’s different. He says he’s been checking them every day,” upper lip in smallest sneering disbelief in Peter’s fidelity. "But it’s all for the better, he keeps saying that.”

Austen could hear those words in Peter’s voice; to Peter it would be all for the better, See the Changing Pictures! Or better yet, Buy the Changing Pictures. Unfair, said a part of him. Peter’s been good to you.

Uncanny echo, "I know he’s pretty much an asshole, but Peter’s been a good friend to you. Especially now.” Sitting on the bed, a certain slump as if she were very tired; maybe she was; how had she slept the night before? Deeply? Or on edge? He wanted to ask, to say simply, How are you? How do you feel? Then the skitter, had Peter sold anything else? Changed *how*?

“When did he say—”

"About an hour, he said he had a couple stops to make first.” She looked at her watch. "Half an hour now.”

And Russell, breezy, beer in hand, "Hey, listen to—” and hand on the door, abruptly cold, "I thought you left," and a colder stare for Austen, suspected of dumb duplicity, You asshole, all over his face. Turning to Emily: “Come back to pick up your undies or something?”

Emily’s bored rancor, ‘Try not to be a bigger shit than you are," but Austen surprising them all by launching himself at Russell, grabbing his throat in a two-handed clench and shouting, "Stop it, just stop it!” a hold easily broken but Russell all the way back, wary stare at Austen’s eyes, a man gauging the temper of a beast and it startled Austen into stillness, then dawned.

"I’m okay,” stepping away himself, please find your comers. "I'm not having a seizure, all right? You just, I just got pissed off, okay? I’m sorry.” Rubbing his eyes, embarrassed himself by his silly juvenile reaction; defending the fair lady’s honor. Even Emily looked embarrassed, or perhaps that was just distaste. "I’m sorry," he said again.

"Sure.” Russell’s lost beer, shiny spill soaking into darkness on the carpet. "Right. —Listen,” his news reasserting itself, "I just talked to her, and she said it was okay for us to come down there. She said come now.”

Austen, mouth drooped a little, unable to remember who Russell was talking about, then all in a rush, "Yeah, I, I can’t go right now," and Russell’s misunderstanding disgust, "Oh *fuck*, man,” and Emily’s dry “Whatever you’re talking about, it’s got nothing to do with me."

"Oh *right,"* but Austen’s passion, "Something happened to my art, Russell, I have to find out!” and all of it too much, a feeling like the top of his scalp was crawling away and his stitches *hurt* as if replaced by stealthy wire and he sat where he was, flat collapse near the closed door of the bathroom, hands loose against the floor like things exhausted, as exhausted in the end as he.

Emily, her felt unwilling sympathy, “Why don’t you try now?” and up, on his feet, taking up the phone and the number she gave him. Ring, ring and the gallery’s machine, citing hours, current shows, and the sudden blurt of Peter’s voice, "Hello!”

"Peter, it’s me,” feeling nothing now but the clench. "What happened to my stuff? Emily said you said it all changed, she—”

“Yeah, it changed all right, it won’t stop changing.” An unaccustomed weariness, Peter now in a place he perhaps had never been; Austen too keyed up to fully notice but later would reflect on that flatness, the aridity of his tone; Peter too was changed, and changing. “I have them right where I can keep an eye on them, and I’ll tell you, Austen, I have seen some weird shit before but this is definitely taking the cake.”

And listening, the intricate pavane, Peter listing: each piece, time of day, the quality of light, the presumed nature of each change but in everything one constant: the relentless drip of a color so pale it was nameless, but if he had to, Peter said, he would call it silver. Barely there and yet so much a force, sometimes blended, sometimes overlaid like a glaze. Unmistakable, and Austen’s listening face closed, a wound stitched shut by circumstance. Leaning against the headboard, conscious only of the feel of the phone in his hand, Peter’s voice, exquisite dread an overlay itself; glaze, yes, no, dare to look again at what he had done, today, with the portrait; had that changed too? Sorrow, anxiety, ludicrous dim bubble of curiosity (changed how, exactly? no one could tell him in a thousand words what his own eyes could in half a glance); and obbligato, anger: how dare, how *dare* anything come messing with his work, who the fuck was the artist here anyway? And the cold notion, he had relinquished control, hadn't he, those dear dead T-shirt days? Fallow. Is that what opened the door to *this?*

Peter was saying something, he squeezed shut his eyes and tried to listen. "—going blind trying to keep up with this shit.”

"Just don’t sell it."

"You’ve said that twenty times, Austen, okay? I won’t sell it, I promise, I swear on my balls, okay?” A sigh. "Let me talk to Em again, all right?”

Passing the phone like some quaint instrument, It’s for you, and Russell urgent, bent to his weary ear in caricature of conscience, should he be wearing wings or sporting horns?

"When I talked to her she said we should come right away. I know this art shit is a big deal for you but maybe she can help, you know? She is one

strange fuckin’ old woman, that’s for sure,” and Emily beyond them, hanging up the phone.

To Austen’s haggard hangdog swivel, "He’ll keep in touch,” then cold, mostly to Russell, "Wherever you’re going, don’t let me stop you.”

"No,” Austen said, "come with us. Please.”

"To the witch doctor’s?” but without a smile, then rising, gathering her purse, opening the door on the dark. Austen wordless, followed last by Russell, sour discontent, “Yeah, why not?" Clicking the lock, clicking keys. "Maybe you’ll learn something.”

9

No juju shack, nothing at all mysterious: her house might have been Cyndee’s. Fading forest green, missing shingles and dead grass, plastic Virgin wired clumsy to a listing stand. Casual beckon inside her back-door kitchen, rusting rollaway stand with Sanka jars and tatter-soft envelopes of soup mix and powdered drinks, dishes in the sink, a peeling card table with playing card motif. There were six folding chairs; Russell sat down at once, Emily in the seat opposed. A moment’s fumbling and Austen next to her, the instant sorrowful impulse to take her hand. His own were so cold he could not feel fingers, only the hand itself like a folded square of flesh.

Crossing to sit between Emily and Russell, Mrs. Olivia, jeans and headwrap and an absurdly oversize sweatshirt imprinted with a caricature bulldog: "Hoyas,” brushing it with a finger, then to their incomprehension, "Georgetown. My grandbaby goes there.” She lit a cigarette, pulled an ashtray close. Looked at each, Emily tense and cool, arms crossed, Russell hands in pockets, and Austen, cold apex, the centerless core; what did she make of him?

Waiting for her to speak, conscious of apprehension; that childish dread again, did the others feel it too? Emily, never; Russell? Maybe, but then again he had spoken with Mrs. Olivia before, arranged this tâte-à-tâte, this interview. For him it was all interest, exciting like a dare fulfilled. Of course, no one would be poking curly fingernails in his brain, either.

Her voice was mild, a little hoarse. “You like my house?”

Emily said nothing. Austen, nodding dumb, and Russell’s grin, ‘You got that statue out front. You believe in that?”

“I used to be a Catholic,” she said. "Sometimes I still am.”

“Yeah?" and Russell’s grin wider; her own smile dry: “You don't go to church? You a troublemaker?"

"I cause more trouble than trouble’s caused me,” jaunty, and Emily’s eyes rolling in a disgust meant to be viewed but Mrs. Olivia’s headshake, no. "No you ain’t,” she said. ‘You’re just a little shitkicker, that’s what you are,” too bleak even to be ironic, and Emily’s instant approval, wide mouth like a cat’s permanent smile. Austen sat, tennis match gaze, triangular back and forth between them, now Russell’s discomfort, now Emily, now Mrs. Olivia. Looking at him.

Drier yet, "You need a doctor."

Russell, instantly, "I told you, we been all through that," but she shushed him, mm mm mm I know I *know.* "I’m not talking about a regular kind of doctor. A *brujo,* like. You know what that is?”

Russell again into the quiet, refrigerator hum like an unbroken spell. "It’s a witch. A male witch.”

Brief smirk around another cigarette, lit from a lighter embossed with initials, *BBJ.* "You’re half right, 'cause he’s half a doctor too. Not the kind that gives you fifty tests fifty times and tells you nothin’. He can fix you,” eyes on Austen. Her cigarette moved like a pointer. "He can fix anybody he wants. He can fix you too," abruptly to Emily, whose face tensed, brittle artificial calm. "You ain’t scared of the devil in hell, but I know about you."

Austen knew, too, the swift breathing that meant anger, motionless hands, were they cold as his? Catechized, she said nothing, kept her face as still, and a smell, faint and sweet as lavender, old-fashioned scent in the close oniony air.

"I won’t throw cards for you," dismissively, Emily wiped away, "just be wasting my time. But you, now," back to Austen, everyone’s star patient, "you got to get some help pretty soon. You feel it, too, don’t you? In your chest.” Patting her own breast, the bulldog rippling gray. "You go on to see the doctor. He doesn’t see everybody who comes. But you tell him I said."

The lavender smell heavier, almost chemical. "What,” his voice unused; try again. Hands so cold they hurt; the kitchen seemed smaller now. "What’s his name?”

The silence. Cigarette smoke in his face, lavender a bitter reek, if he rubbed his fingers he could feel it, oily. Mrs. Olivia coughed, a phlegmy smoker’s cough. “He calls himself Dr. Quiet. I’ll give you his number,” reaching behind her for a fake patchwork sack, her purse. What does a

witch keep in her purse? —like a playground joke, all at once so frightened, he felt he might piss himself, dread like the lavender taking his breath and the sinuosity of stitches as if in their own mischievous rhythm they were tightening to loose, surprise! here comes your brain. You've sprung a leak! and her fingers, those nails, nudging at him with a small torn piece of paper.

"Take it," she said, and in his dumbstruck hesitation Russell's impatient hand, reaching past but she jerked the scrap away, fast, roused now to turn with anger on Russell, "Stop it! *Take* it," again to Austen, apparently he must reach for it himself. You have to want to be changed, another joke, the paper itself informed of a stench so violent, he could barely trust it between finger and thumb; but he did. Emily, inscrutable; Russell's stare. Mrs. Olivia as quiet as disease sleeping in the blood, rumble of wet cough as she lit up again. Transferring the paper to a pocket, to feel it move against his fingers like a piece of slippery flesh, virulent and alive.

Glimpsed tang of silver, coasting its ragged edge.

And out of the house at once, back door bang and crawling into the cold backseat, the smell of the paper filling the car: lavender, no air to breathe. He opened all the windows, could hear Emily, exasperated, calling him back; Emily, who could rise to any occasion, no matter how confusing or foul. Emily, to whom he was not so much a problem she could not solve but a puzzle whose solution she refused to accept; the oldest joke of all, what *did* she see in him? He realized he was talking out loud, a breathless babble costing half the air he had, Mrs. Olivia was an unrecognized pulmonary genius, he was strangling on his own fear. Coughing, sounding worse than she had, liquid cough and hand cupped prudent around his traitor mouth

out of which jumped something moist and twinkling, pulled back his hand in terror and it leapt for his face, wheel slamming himself like whiplash back against the seat, heels digging for the floorboard, help, *help me*, plop on the paper and dragging the scrap to his mouth, fighting his own hands, help me, wet hands, too dark to see more than a shimmer, here and there, the paper jaunty in his throat now, a glitter and they must have heard him, they came running, all three, Emily in the lead.

"Austen!" pulling at the door handle, Russell's grunting arms locked around his chest, drag him out and gulping, ah ah ah, he was drowning, drowning on a grassless lawn, and a body upon his, hands now in his mouth, Mrs. Olivia, those nails down his throat oh *God* and powerless, he tried to buck her off, roll away, and all at once she stood, up, off him, and

something in hand and he rolled half to his side and threw up, no silver, no blood, just plain old vomit, over and over until he found that he could breathe. His lungs hurt, ominous scorched feeling, the muscles of his chest felt torn. Breathe.

Emily's voice too loud, bent over him like a war nurse, "Austen! Are you all right?" and he squeezed her hand, his own still slick, weakly tried to wipe it on the grass, dirt. His stitches were bleeding. Russell said something to Mrs. Olivia, who shrugged, then showed what was in her hand.

The scrap, fouled now.

"I'll call him myself," she said, and then to Austen, "You sleep sittin' up tonight, all right? You understand me? Don't sleep flat," and gone into the house again, presumably to make the call. Russell helping him to sit up. His shirt was spotty with vomit, the muscles of his back trembling and loose. "Where's Emily?" squinting in the porch light, diffused, "where is she?" and trying to get up, Russell holding him back, gently, gently so.

"She'll be right back, she went to get some paper towels," and there she was, wiping at his face, helping him clean up. He was crying. Had he been crying long?

"Address's on there," and there was Mrs. Olivia again, everyone seemed to appear and disappear with such disarming ease. To Emily now, obviously recognizing by instinct with whom she ought to be dealing, she passed the new piece of paper. "He said come around noon. *Watch* him, now—Sleep sitting up," to Austen, loaded into the front seat this time, "remember," and his stomach rolling helplessly, empty and sore. Shirt stuck damp to his skin, he must smell like puke; he tried to move away from Emily but in the end did not; the whole car smelled like puke anyway. Even with the windows open.

Between the two of them they got him into the motel room, the shower, Russell stationed on the toilet to make sure he did not collapse in the spray. "Scared us all tonight." Loud, over the water.

"Scared myself," but unheard, hot and colorless rush behind the shower curtain's pale industrial brown, soap sting in all the sore spots and a deeper hitch, now, with every tiny hunted breath; lips pressed to a deliberate jailer's line; he did not want to feel the creep of water in his mouth.

He thought he would not be able to sleep sitting up, but must have gone as soon as he hit the bed, maybe gone already in the shower, no memory. Waking in a wash of bedside light, lamp shaded by a hand towel and Emily,

wide-awake. Looking at him. On the other bed, Russell sprawled in a curious weightless way, half mummified by the coverlet; cold in the room.

"Hey." His throat felt swollen, thick dry meat. She sat with knees drawn up, enclosing him next to the wall; crib bars, bed guard, had he regressed to the point where others were responsible for his safety? Yes. Then what? "How are you?"

“My clothes are dirty,” she said, soft, without particular inflection. "Isn’t that a funny thing to think about? That and my mail. I need to go pick up my mail. And my messages."

"I’m sorry,” looking not at her face but her hands, loose around her knees. All of her so lovely, proportioned like an instrument, a graceful device built for many purposes. To touch her hand, take it now, feel it in his own; what would she do?

Eyes closed, the deep sigh that meant more than exhaustion. "I don’t know what to do with you, Austen, I really don’t.”

Help me. Love me. Come back to me, all the monstrous selfish things but he meant them, all of them, he would have said them out loud if he thought there was the barest chance of her listening. "I don’t know either.” Wanting to lean against her, strong shoulder, to burrow into her strength and hide there, and looked to see that she knew exactly what he was thinking and sorrowed for it: a part of that grievous whole, this moment’s failure another leaf plucked from the tree planted deep in the soil of their decline, she aware unto pain of each spoiled edge, each vein particular and minute; and he, idiot guesses, is it green? black? white? Is it bigger than a bread-box? wanting with the old brute insistence irreducible by reason to sweep the tree itself away, start over. Love each other again.

"I love you,” he said.

“I know.”

“Emily, I’m *sorry."*

"You’re always sorry,” without rancor; without love. ‘Try and sleep," rising, silent steps to the bathroom, and the closing door. He tried to wait for her return but could not; slept, into dreams complex, stretched hands and collars made of liquid lead, the thrust of clever and torturous bone and woke in that midst startled to find Russell now beside him, perched surly in the lightening dark, sleeping with one hand knee-propped to cup his jaw as if its toppling weight would force an alarm if one was needed. Emily slept on the other bed, hair snarled, one bare foot extended from beneath the

sheltering blanket and as he watched, it flexed, as if on the shadow cusp of thwarted flight.

Limbo district, he thought, and did not know where the words came from; but it suited the area exactly, the warehouses, empty buildings and small stores now husked by neglect and pale decay; the few houses patched in a checkerboard series of mismatched burglar bars. Beside him, Russell squinting in the bright and warmthless sun, consulting each building they passed. "This's it, I think," slowing to an idle. "Looks like a dope house, doesn't it?"

"No," the address memorized, what else to do on this silent ride? Russell's banter dead before they left the motel parking lot, his own sad dread augmented by Emily's early and obvious poker-faced disapproval. "It's the one after, the two-story one. The brick one," though that was half by courtesy, what brick there was left was left in tatters that scabbed the surface, a soft unpleasant gray like a nest of paper wasps.

Behind them, Emily's impatient horn, she was parked before the house. Insisting on taking her own car, why?—to distance herself, surely, but in more than one way? Would she leave, at the end of this interview, examination, rash diagnostics in a direction she would never condone? At the motel, checking out, she had not once met his eyes. That morning's mirror had shown him a face not worth perusal, black stitch of slipped tonsure and the more subtle marks of illness and fatigue; there was a cast to his skin as mortal gray as this house, now, its lower windows papered by long brown scrolls frayed at the sides to reveal, what? Nothing. Darkness inside, but not the darkness of an empty house.

On the pavement, careful heft of the towel-wrapped portrait and he saw they were waiting for him to go first. Fair enough. There was a doorbell hanging by a twist of coated wire; bare wire used to loop the screenless screen door shut. At his knock the whole frame trembled.

No one answered.

Russell, sideways over the porch railing, announcing, "There's back stairs," and Austen leaned to look, turning back to see a face on the other side of the door.

White woman, young skin slippery with jaundice, wig as yellow hung mordantly askew on her bony scalp. "You want the doctor?" in a voice that

had long ago lost true connection with the world beyond the screen door; when Austen nodded, she nodded too.

"Use the stairs," and the inner door closing, whiff of some ancient garbage left to compost where it lay, dust caked to dirt immeasurable and Emily's disgust, not fastidiousness outraged but a far deeper distaste, for all of it, her own presence maybe most of all; again for Austen the knowledge of failure, his presence compelling hers. He wanted to tell her he was sorry but she had already turned away.

Metal stairs missing the bottom riser, making the first step peculiarly long. Again he was first, pausing on the landing long enough to read the file card duct-taped to the storm door, situated so as to leave free the fish-eye peephole: BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. His knock a dull sound, tentative and weak, on the white wood of the inner door.

"Who is it?" Crisp. Man's voice.

"Austen Bandy," leaning away from the peephole. "Mrs. Olivia told—"

Locks manipulated, the swing of the opening door. "Come in," the inner smell out, warm smell and that same crisp voice, ageless smile and yellowing teeth, smoker's teeth, stepping back so all three could enter.

"I'm Dr. Quiet." His hand was warm, too, and very large, talcum scent like the world's biggest baby. "Olivia just called. She was worried you wouldn't make it on time." Sepia skin, thin frieze of graying hair, stethoscope and foam-pad headphones around his neck. Maybe fifty, maybe older, yet none of the physical hesitations of age; no hesitations, in fact, at all. "She must like you," with that smile again, to Austen, "have a seat," and to Emily and Russell, stiff bodyguard stance, a nod to say the same.

Big room fashioned awkwardly from smaller ones, two doors at its periphery, bathroom and bedroom maybe. The walls were medical charts, foldouts, X rays, photographs nailed directly into the brownish plaster. Folding chairs, black-stenciled backs: ODDFELLOWS. One long table, pale-draped in sterile paper, an array of small silver instruments atop a TV tray picturing a family of solemn mallards. A TV and two VCRs. Coffeemaker and plastic cups, spilled sugar. Another long table, this one dressed in bright red cloth like a matador's cape, covered, Scheherazade: Good Luck Dream Books, Magic Numbers cubes, green and purple spirit candles, some burning, some not, endless tiny bottles—"Vete de Aqui," "Money Drawing Oil"—and square packets of powder. Hologram cards of saints, Saint Sebastian, Saint Dymphna, captured in their moment of

sheerest Technicolor agony, turn the card just so and see the soul's ascension, iridescent vapor ephemeral as holy steam. All of it viewed with a hallucinatory excitation, a clarity so intense that Austen felt he could read like runes the thin veins of cracking plaster, diagnose the future from the shifting scents of previous patients, supplicants, dust and ashes and he realized they were all staring at him, and that the doctor had spoken his name, maybe more than once.

"Austen," that unmistakable medical stare but conversational, still, "can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I—I'm sorry, I wasn't listening," clumsy back to his chair, hands between his knees, shaking, looking around and around the room. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you slept well last night."

"Yeah, fine. It was fine," that long table again, so sweetly draped. The portrait against his knee, had he placed it there? its feel not comfortable but absolutely right.

"I'd like to start with a basic exam, all right?" and Emily, at once, "He has all sorts of medical records," her deliberate exclusion of the title, she would not call him doctor. "Do you want to see them?"

Austen, confused, "No, I didn't bring them, I left—" and Emily's cold glance: "I have them in my car."

"No, thank you," the doctor's grave hand pulling down a hanging lamp, swag lamp with garish gingerbread trim. "Sit here, please," and Austen crossed to that chair, ancient dentist's chair, the portrait carried close by still; security; absurd. Tilting his face to the light.

"Open your eyes," and the expected sweep of the penlight, but a much longer inspection, was the doctor peering through pupils to the stuttering strand of optic nerve, back to the visual cortex, back to the back of the brain? And what did he see there, under wet leaves? Fingers gentle gauze, against his lids to close them: "You work with your eyes," softly, but Emily heard. "He's an artist," her voice flat and his pleasant rebuke, "I know that," touching Austen's lids again.

Blinking, now, and now those same hands reaching for the portrait, "May I look?" Waiting for Austen's nod to unwrap the motel towel, hold the portrait just so beneath the light.

After a long and intricate perusal, during which he imagined his own motives and hysterics laid bare to that inhumanly perceptive gaze, Dr.

Quiet: "It’s still wet in some places,” and Austen smiled, relieved.

"Oil paint takes a long time to dry."

"How long?"

"Days, sometimes. Maybe longer, depending on how thick it is.”

Careful rewrapping, the portrait set atilt against a *Physicians’ Desk Reference* dated 1983. “You’re a very great artist," said Dr. Quiet. “I’d like to see more of your work."

“Do you have any experience whatsoever with neurology?” Emily, so embarrassingly rough and loud that even Russell, himself uncharacteristically quiet, looked surprised; out of her chair, up like a boxer, a brawler. Scornfully, "You don’t even pretend to be a quack,” but she was shaking, Austen could see the tremor in her hands as she snatched up her purse, extracted keys and "Emily,” out of the chair, reaching for her, the room too small for real privacy but he spoke into her ear, as quietly as he could.

"Please,” one hand very loose on her forearm, “please let’s just see what he can do, all right? Please?"

‘This is *stupid,"* so angry there were tears in her eyes. “I won’t talk to you in here,” and out onto the landing, staring down at the metal steps. The cold immersion, wind across his face and bare hands. Fiercely, "What?” and he bent to her, tried to think what best to say as

the swim of silver

like vertigo, and gone. "Emily,” but "You listen to me,” with a venom he had not heard since the bitterest days, “I’m not going to waste my time watching you play around with a witch doctor when you ought to be in a hospital,” and at his barely felt headshake, "You don't care what I say, fine. I don’t have to stay here, I have a *job,* Austen, I have things to go back to, I have a life and I don’t need things to be *crazy,"* screaming now, screaming through her tears. "Everything is crazy with you, everything!”

"Just give it a little time,” detaining clasp of the hand that held the keys, spikes between her fingers, hurting him, "a week. Please, Emily, I swear to God, if nothing happens in a week—”

the swim again, heavier, like oil across his vision, for a moment he did not see her face, the landing, anything, felt he might topple like a stuntman to clumsy scriptless death below

"—I’ll stop. All right? I’ll just stop.”

"And go to a hospital?”

"Yes.” Lying. Holding both hands now. "All right?”

She did not answer, and for a moment he was frightened by his own wholly unaccustomed duplicity, had she smelled it? Did she know? Bent to her, ready to concoct something, further desperate explanations but she nodded, took the keyless hand from his to wipe at her face, tracked cold by tears in the painful wind.

“All right then,” weary, "a week.” Both hands hers again. “I have to go make some calls, work,” that sigh again, "I’ll call Fran and see if she or Stuart can house-sit for me. Are you going to stay here now?”

"Yeah,” not sure exactly what she meant by stay, knowing what he wanted. Stay. Yeah. "When will you come back?”

"When I’m ready.” Tears gone, down the stairs; she did not turn back or even look.

Trudging back inside, hands so cold they did not flex, straight like frozen winter sticks. Russell was looking through a large book with a matte black cover. Dr. Quiet, bent over the coffeemaker, scooping grounds with the meticulous care of a Renaissance poisoner; he smiled when he saw Austen, spoke to Russell: "I’ll need to do the examination now,” and Russell, half distracted, put the book aside.

"Right. I’ll go grab some lunch or something, all right?” and then, carefully, "She coming back?”

"Later on.” The coffeemaker began to drip. Dr. Quiet was prepping the table, his hands quick and sure through a well-recalled dance, postures they had known many times before. "I guess I'll see you then.”

"Right,” again, and gone, the wind sighing silent with the closing of the door and Austen in the seat that Russell had used, no need to move, no need to do anything but wait, calm, flanked by the panoply of X rays and vascular chartings, mapped flesh and cartographers’ musings in the near silence of Dr. Quiet’s quiet, elegant backdoor shaman and he, passive, the patient’s patient finally come to rest beneath the crushed iconic gaze of bones and the eyes of the hectic saints.

“Do you dream?"

“Sometimes.” Cold and drowsy. Menthol smell. Shirt off, shoes off, lying against the familiar crackle of paper. Big hands in plastic gloves, touching his forehead. On the ceiling were shadows webbed by meager sunlight, more cracks the tracery of which he had no patience to complete.

There was a strident itch at the back of his neck, but he was too tired to move.

"Did you know," but not a question, voice pleasant, accentless, low, "that 'limbic' is Latin for 'border'? I've done a lot of work with the brain."

So have I, but did not say it. He was as cold as if dunked beneath the ice and left to freeze; to die. Would he die? Mammalian diving reflex, or did that only work for kids?

"Have you ever been to New Orleans? Or Seattle?"

This was like one of his dreams, but he didn't say that either; that same senseless logic, the way the edges of one thing tended to blur into another. Let's hope this guy doesn't turn silver! and coughed so he would not laugh, silly giggle like a ten-year-old looking at naked pictures.

"I've never been anywhere but sick."

"Sick," a plastic instrument shaped like a circle on a stick, pressing one temple, the other, "is quite a place. Have you ever heard the term 'stone of folly'?"

"No." Liar.

The instrument paused. "It refers to an operation performed in the Middle Ages, and in some cultures more anciently. They basically," touch, touch, "cut a square hole in a man's skull. Blink for me. Right eye, good, now the left eye. Good. Do you paint when you're having seizures?"

"No." Then, remembering Russell, "I don't know. I might have. I don't really remember." Glad, the relief exquisite, to tell the truth, simply, to tell everything. "Can you help me?"

Nothing for a moment, then, "I intend to. You see I used to treat the same illnesses, over and over, the same sins: greed can manifest itself as an ulcer, or migraines, or hideous obesity; pride can be premature ejaculation. Laziness can be bronchitis, or chronic constipation . . . stupidity can be *anything*, do you see what I mean? But this is different, here." Swabbing Austen's temples with the paste he had come to associate with suctions and leads, creak of dry casters and a small machine, gray paint over bare metal, pulled close to his horizontal head. Face like a voltmeter, simple needles, a couple of knobs. Two leads, one to each temple.

"Now," conversational, "I want you to watch a movie with me." Remote in hand, the topmost VCR and the sound of the tape coming to life: immediate stare into the reddest eyes Austen had ever seen. Jerking too-slow pullback and the whole face came into view, a woman, a girl, the

surface of her skin no skin at all but a million mouths: rips, gouges, pulling farther back to show that the damage was in no way random, was a pattern: like distorted orms, like the twisting arms of a hungry god.

"She did that to herself," said the doctor. "With the tip of a can opener. Took about a month."

The patience of it, unfathomable; and those red, red eyes. "What," childish urge to rub his own eyes, "what happened to her?"

"She's in a psychiatric facility in Coldwater." Fade out and in from static, now a man, naked, drooping dewlaps of flesh from chin and belly, scrotum, the heavy almost womanish thighs, slow rotation before the camera to show the grotesquerie of bare bone squatting impish from rounded shoulders, bone so white it looked artificial. Bones like wings, protruding, eager for flight. The camera swiveling close to catch every sheening inch, then abruptly the man's face as he turned, obedient to an off-camera command. His face: the peering eyes behind squared glasses, the ordinary slump. A winged man.

'That's John," and the doctor shook his head, professional regret. "Interesting, though, isn't it?"

Austen said nothing.

John gone, and a woman now, middle-aged, bald, who spoke French and picked incessantly at her left ear, right hand cupped incongruous over the busy left; when, sullen, she moved them both in response to that same off-camera voice, the earless hole on the side of her head came visible, ragged flap of infecting flesh and what seemed to be the remnants of a flower tattoo.

"Schizophrenic voices." Dr. Quiet's commentary equally so; now he sat in a folding chair beside the examining table, mantis legs crossed easy in polyester black. "She was trying to excise her eardrum, actually. A fairly extreme example of OCD."

Pick, pick, pick, those busy terrible fingers. Fairly extreme. "What's OCD?" closing his eyes, would the doctor notice?

"Obsessive-compulsive disorder. Repetitive behavior, essentially. In some people it takes the form of hand-washing, or checking a door fifty times to make sure it's locked." Pleasantly, "And please keep your eyes open. I'm monitoring your response."

The tape lasted close to an hour; Austen kept his eyes open. A man who had inserted nails into his gums, mimicking the teeth he himself had

carefully extracted; a woman whose sly insectile chatter ceased only long enough to display her black and bifurcated tongue; two men, twins, who were able to produce blood from their empty hands, tandem and separately, at casual will. People who could levitate, who had been to the center of the earth. People who claimed to see God, the devil, who were convinced they were the avatars of both. Or neither, gods and devils more bloody and obscure, people who hung themselves from rubber straps for hours at a time, people who scarred and tore their own bodies, attempting enlightenment, punishment, brute forgetfulness, it went on and on, Austen's eyes stayed open and it went on and on. Finally the end, blessed static and the VCR shut itself off. The slippery suction of the leads retracting, irresistible to touch the spots where they had been: small itching circles and he scratched, quick and luxuriously painful, sat up slow to postural vertigo. Leaning back on his elbows. Dr. Quiet was apparently transcribing his responses, swift silent scribble and looking up to smile at Austen.

"Help yourself to some coffee, if you like. Or I have some Coke in the refrigerator."

'Thanks," slow, still, to cross the room, when he reached to pour found his hands nearly useless with reaction; it was like witnessing an immolation, the memory of those people was inexcisable. He drank the coffee standing up, trying to be calm, trying not to shake. The cup was heavy white restaurant china, hot in his hands.

"Austen."

Back at the table. Holding his painting.

"Do you mind if I videotape this?"

"No," without thinking, then the small inner cringe but too late; apparently the camera was always ready. Slow voluptuous pan, an almost myopic inspection of every thickened inch, then up, and down, and up and down again; the whole process took at least five minutes, a long time to consider a painting. "It's not finished yet," and the answering nod, yes, I know. One last pan and the red light went out, the camera back to its perpetually opened bag, eternal vigilance.

"You must be hungry," the doctor said. "Are your friends picking you up for supper?"

"I guess so, yeah." For once in his life he had forgotten Emily. Distracted, the question bubbling, he had to ask. 'Those people, in the video —they were all your patients?"

“Most of them were.”

"Did you," now his voice was shaking too, he set the cup aside somewhere, amidst gritty spilled sugar, "were you able to help them?”

Calm avuncular nod. “Some of them.” Big hands folding, professor with new student, answering the basics one more time. "Some of them didn’t want help, in the sense you mean.”

'Then what did they want?”

"Documentation.”

The camera bag, lightly agape. His portrait, tilted thoughtfully to catch the last light; the afternoon was over. Again, "Can you help me?” even in his own ears more pitiful, more shameful: please: I don’t want to be like them. Closing his eyes to see beneath his lids the ghosting silver, opening them at once to Dr. Quiet’s nod, long head, long lids on the dark, considering eyes.

"You don’t need to worry. I’m sure that together we can do a lot." Wiping his hands with a paper towel; a machine sound, somewhere close by. Maybe in the bedroom. “I’ll tell you, though,” smiling again, "I’m getting hungry myself. If your friends are running late, you’re welcome to join me for supper.”

"No, no thanks, I’m sure they’ll be around."

“Then please excuse me," and off into that room, prudent sound of the door clicking closed. Finding his coffee, finishing it, looking out the darkened window and headlights, pulling up in front of the house: Emily’s car. Rising, coat on and calling, awkward, "Dr. Quiet?” the name silly as an alias, "Doctor? I’m taking off now,” but through the machine sound no answer and he left, closing the door behind him, twisting the handle to make sure it was locked.

Both of them in the car, Emily glacial, Russell tense, both anxious to hear what had happened: grist for opposing mills, but how to explain? Staring at his hands, avoiding eye contact with either one: "I’m tired.” Mist, down the matte planes of the window; he had not seen it begin. "All right? I’m really tired.”

No good. "What happened?" Emily’s anger a muted thing but still he smelled it, saw it in the flex of her hands on the wheel. "Did he examine you?”

“Yeah. Some.” Passing more broken-down buildings, a party store surprisingly lively, LOTTO sign big and shiny above the doors. "Standard

stuff.” What a liar he was turning into. "He showed me a video.”

"Did he ask to see the hospital files?” but he knew she was not asking a question, watched her palm the wheel to turn them down the highway, destination incongruous in the shifting rain, ANDY BEE’S, a steak house, two or three cars in the parking lot and she with brake-jamming gracelessness, slamming out of the car without bothering to look at them.

"She’s pissed off,” Russell’s unnecessary aside, then eagerly, "So what happened, man? Soon as we walked in there, I thought, my dad would’ve loved this guy! What’d he do, anyway? Did he really examine you the—”

In another car, another moment of darkness: "You knew.” Austen’s memory stretching like the stitches in his healing scalp, encompassing as well Russell’s concealed excitement, that night at BAR, dammed maybe by the long dreary unpredictability of his episodes, something new all the time but always bad. He thought: I don’t know anything. I don’t even want to know anything. Out loud, “I’ll know more about everything tomorrow,” then wondering without anticipation if this were truly a lie.

The meal a cold disaster, the ride back worse. Turning not left but right, Austen wondering where they were bound if not back to the motel. Then: a swerve into unexpected darkness, one small sign advertising WEEKLY RATES: the new roost. Elderly pea soup carpet, shredded roll of toilet paper in the bathroom and no hope of getting more till morning. Mildew smell, a tangible cold when Austen drew back the sheets. Russell before the TV, crossed feet in smelly socks, nursing beer and already half asleep.

Emily, from the bathroom, misshapen white T-shirt and reddened eyes and for a moment he thought not of her tears but those video eyes, scored and scorning face; imagine the sheer discipline necessary for such a mutilating feat, a month’s worth of can opener, it was not to be imagined. He wondered what Emily would say if he told her the truth, told her without exaggeration or denial the things he had seen; stupid. He knew exactly what she would say.

Now: long wedge of sheet between them, he sitting awkward, one leg half on the bed and her voice absolutely flat: "You can sleep here too. Just don’t touch me.” Rolling onto her side, then turning back: “Not even by accident," and back again, her breathing uneven, gaps in the rhythm that might have meant more tears but he did not dare to notice, could not dare to turn to her though all he wanted on earth was to take her in his arms, lie in hers and weep together, weep until they could make no other sound, then

sleep to wake and run, far and far and far away. To heaven, the past, a fairy tale; he was too stupid to be alive; he fell asleep mourning his own remarkable idiocy and dreamed of silence unremembered, the vast blank place where pain is not the toll for feeling and the only silver is the shine behind eyes that see nothing and nothing at all.

Morning, heavy winds and Russell behind the wheel to Dr. Quiet's; together they found it closed, door locked, no sign or note but the three-by-five card that said BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. "We should've called," for the tenth time, Austen's defeated sag against the railing and Russell squinting back down the stairs: "Let's ask that girl."

Yellow dyspeptic skin, that wig, that voice. Worthy of the video. "You ask," and Russell's sudden grin, "Shit, all right," jaunty down the stairs, Austen slower; by his descent she was already at the door, holding it open, Russell inside without a second look. A car went by, bass rattling the windows it passed.

"You cornin' too?" the girl asked, without interest; her arm might have been made of plastic for its bare unhealthy sheen. Nodding, embarrassed to keep her holding the door, to be there at all, he followed.

Cigarette smoke, everything unmatching shades of red and blue and brown and shit- green, all the windows covered by blankets except the door, which wore paper, brown paper, Austen had a lunatic urge to rip it down and draw all over it, draw his name in huge flourishing capitals, give it to her and say, I'm a famous artist you know, give it to Peter and see if it changed. He would have to call Peter soon. He would have to—

"Austen, hey. I'm talking to you," and his guilty startle, looking up, the girl gazing at him with eyes unsurprised as a gecko lizard.

"She says," as if an interpreter was not only necessary but indispensable, "the doctor took off early this morning."

"Do you know when he'll be back?" to those eyes that did not care, had retreated into deeps that even he, in his degradation of silver, could never hope to reach. "Do you—"

"No," glancing at him and then away. Then, abrupt: "You're the one with the problem, aren't you?"

Mouth a little open, closing it to nod, yes. Admitting, and Russell's avidity, new freak show unsuspected: what could this one do besides look weird? Austen felt a moment's sorrow for her, untouched by the bizarre

inhumanity of her posture, her tone, all the things that might have made her sympathetic even with the false coin of pity's empathy, but no; she did not look as if she cared, either. Perhaps she saw them with compound eyes, who knew?

"He's a prophet," the girl said.

Austen said nothing.

"Some people think he's a fortune-teller," lighting a cigarette, bottom lip loose and wet as she inhaled. "You know the difference? A fortune-teller don't believe in God."

Embarrassed, conscious of the warm imprecision of his religion that so far had been Emily and art, in mixed order; Cyndee had gone to church the way other people go to restaurants but had rarely taken him along. "I don't know what I believe in," but she cared even less about that, she might have been addressing a photograph or a half-eaten snack. Leaning against the gutted torso of a plaid couch, cigarette angled like a twig from her fingers.

"Don't matter what you believe in. *He* believes. He *knows.* He's *espiritismo."*

"What's that?" Russell asked, but she ignored him; apparently she was done talking, had perhaps exhausted her conversational allowance for one day. She sat on the portion of the sofa that was capable of use and did not open her eyes to them, sat smoking; when her cigarette was done she lit another from its stub.

Russell's nudge: "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. Wait, I guess." The smoke was making his eyes water lightly, inconsequential tears. "You can take off if you want to."

"I'll stay awhile," and he did, together sitting in the car, nudging, still, for information, what all had happened? What do you think will happen today? Austen felt no urge as he had with Emily to tell about the video; his answers bordered on the rude, he said nothing worth hearing, kept it up until a smart black compact car, its chrome scratched to steel consistency, swung up over the curb to disappear across the hardened grass, park somewhere behind the house. "Must be him," Russell said, and Austen followed: Dr. Quiet in the sunlight, with a small brown paper bag. When he saw them he waved, a brisk motion reminiscent of salute, and on his moving hand Austen saw for a moment the flash of silver, there and gone like a handful of disappearing rings, symbols of promises impermanently kept.

"I know you're in a hurry," rubbing the paste against his temples, different stuff this time, "so we'll have to cut things a little shorter than I'd like. Not that you won't be satisfied with your treatment." The room smelled of cooking but not food. Austen's hands were so cold, they trembled. Russell sent away: great politeness, great reluctance, smiling at each other while Austen stood apart, staring at the table, flashy unmedical bazaar. Alone now, and gaze apprehensive at the television, but the doctor saw, those intercepting eyes: "No video today," he said, kindly; was it kindly? "I have some tests I need to do. It won't take long."

In fact it didn't, but seemed to; Austen felt as if he had been calling out nonsense answers for hours, head plugged into another jerry-rigged box as homemade flash cards stuttered past his gaze. "Close. Blue. A bird, no, a duck. Far away. Far away," like mutant poetry, random attributes attributed by the doctor, there were categories he must adhere to, there was an order to all this. When the test was done, the doctor fixed coffee, its smell mingling with but not disguising that other odor; what's cooking. He almost said it out loud.

"You keep looking around," Dr. Quiet said. "Are you nervous?"

"No," not even lying, he did not feel nervous so much as, what? Alert? Maybe. The coffee was heavy as gravy in his mouth. Swallowing, smiling. Sun through the window making jewels of the tabled bottles.

"I want to show you something," said the doctor.

Across the room, to open the bedroom door, patient, those young man's limbs in moveless stance and that cooking smell again, meat, baking, something, as Austen drew nearer to the room it became worse, tinged with some chemical burn and he did not want to go in there, he did not want to see what was making that smell.

With a smile, "Hell's ambience," Austen unsure he had heard correctly and in the bewildered moment let the doctor stand back, stepped past him stupid as cattle into the trench of that smell and the door closing, no final click, no shuddering lock but on the bed, oh.

Hospital bed, clean, and in it, on it: part of a man. Bald, legless, tubed and wired with elegant precision, flesh sweat formaldehyde and the muscular distortion of a stroke patient, one eye permanently open: the stare of the somnambulist, the professional corpse.

"Sleepballs," said Dr. Quiet cheerfully, checking the graceless small array of monitors, Austen had seen these machines before. "That's what we

used to call them. Some take up to seventy naps a day, did you know that? One of the other interns used to call them cats. For catnaps.” His ministrations less medical, now, the sprinkling of water, the goosey palp of stumps and friable skin. "He’s been like this for quite a while.”

"What,” the smell in his throat, breathing through his mouth did no good at all. Looking past the bed, scared eyes unfocused, this was far worse than anything he had seen in the hospital, this guy should have been dead a long time ago. "What’s wrong with him?”

"A lot of things.” Four separate drips, two in each arm. "I want you to watch me, please.”

Pen from pocket, picking up the rubbery hand to press the pen to thumbnail, hard enough to cause the doctor a moue of effort, eyes half closed. Tapping pen to cheeks, to forehead, blowing into the open eye, touching each with the tip of a cotton swab. Palm across the forehead, turning the yielding head from side to side: "Oculocephalic reflex,” over his shoulder. "Doll’s eyes.” A large syringe in hand, squirting hard into the left ear, the right and to Austen’s visible cringe, “It’s only ice water. But he doesn’t feel it anyway.” Tapping one of the gray machines, "He's on a respirator. His EEG is flat. Has been. No gag reflex, no response to deep pain. I’m showing you all these things because you understand, you know what it’s like. It’s interesting, Stan had an accident much like yours, only his was in his own house.” A small smile, incredible. "You know what they say about accidents occurring in the home.”

Austen was afraid to ask how long ago that had been, afraid to look at that lingering meat on the bed, oh God, oh God, that could have been me. And still the smell, he was not getting used to it, he felt as if he would have to puke very very soon. Sweat on his upper lip, a childish urge to run.

"I see you’re upset by Stan’s condition. Would it make you feel any—’’

From Stan’s airless nostril, the slippery drip of silver.

Ropy, like snot, beginning to run, to flow; both nostrils past the occluding tubes, hungerless mouth tipping open to show full to the gullet, it was all over the bed

From far away, glacier’s bottom: "Austen, you—’’

everywhere, as soon as it hit the air its behavior became manic, it crawled and slithered, life’s mimic, crossed the space between them like a leaping playful pet and fell, all over Austen, more of it pouring from the

husk on the bed, hands warding to mouth and eyes but it was too late, it was coming out of him, too

strange taste all over, and crying to breathe

the feeling of what it must be like, to be inside Stan, to be Stan, dying all the time and never dead, that incredible strange border bridged now by the pulse relentless, silver, silver, gumming up the tubes, sending the needles swinging hard red

and Dr. Quiet, hurling him sideways, entubing hand reaching, did he think Austen was going to choke? Yes? And the silver reaching up, finally, releasing to long freshet column of plain vomit and he could breathe, now, air air air and wiping his eyes free, chuffing sounds and seeing from his post on the floor, past the doctor's limiting legs, Stan's face.

Both eyes open now, blind with silver. Sorrowful dribble in the corner of his mouth.

Weeping a little from sheer reaction, mucus and the clearing remnants of silver and looked to see the doctor, wiping Stan's face, closing his mouth. Turning to Austen, one hand outstretched to raise him up.

"Come on and lie down," said Dr. Quiet; arms steady, accepting Austen's frightened weight, depositing him on a cot at the other end of the small room. Fresh sheets, the flat hospital pillow. Afraid to ask the question, to be asked; but in the doctor's eyes something stunned, like forced knowledge, like the stare on the other side of great confusion or pain.

"No one has ever," looking not at Austen but at the pile on the other bed, "gotten a reaction from Stan."

"A photographer," said the doctor. In the other room now, wiped up, drinking microwave soup,

Austen's hands more controllable as he ate. The doctor had removed his baggy stitches a few minutes beforehand, now washed up at the stainless steel sink, brown skin and the cloudy slick of pink bubbles. "Fine art, not commercial work. Very very good, I could show you some stuff that would just amaze you. And one afternoon his wife found him collapsed in his darkroom. She thought it was a stroke."

Hot and salty, like giant's tears. The mug symmetrical and perfectly black.

"We treated him for stroke, but it wasn't a true stroke at all. It was really the aftermath of a confrontation, a very serious encounter. With

duende.” A pause, the measure and register of Austen’s silence. “You don’t know what that is."

“Espiritismo," said Austen, confused, knowing that was not right but knowing nothing else to say. "That’s what that girl, that woman downstairs said. She said you’re an *espiritismo,"* stumbling again over the pronunciation, and the doctor smiled.

“No. *Espiritismo* is like religion. Duende is like God.” More quiet, and then his smile. ‘You can work here from now on.”

"No,” immediate, the soup burning his lip, “no. I don’t, I want—’’

"I can see it too, Austen. In the room, all that silver. I saw it.”

Silence, beating. Blood like water from a glass, gone from his face and hands, in its wake everything cold and he felt dizzy, he felt as if he might fall out of his chair. Simple. Like the sound a snake makes in the bushes, simple and nothing but itself.

“I know what you need,” the doctor said. "I can help you if you let me.”

Silver scummed across his soup, the barest twinkle, skirting like an oil rainbow disturbed by a playful touch. In the tremor of his hands the spoon jittered; he set it down on the tray, atop one of the mallards’ faces. Its wings were an austere and particular shade, the green of its head as slim as the hood of a cobra.

From the other room, the smell of meat.

The door locks from the inside.

"What?”

Into her stare. His eyes down, flinching, he knew it; helplessly he stepped onto the porch, the wind taking his unzipped jacket, flapping it backward like a flag. In the darkening light Emily’s face was pinched, cold as a hag’s and tired; hair in the wind, hands in her pockets, points of snow too small to be flakes dropping one at a time like stones from God’s balcony, the world’s tallest practical joke.

"What did you say?"

Loud: he retreated to quiet. "I’m going to stay here for a little while.”

“Come down to the car,” turning, wheeling almost, too angry to walk down the stairs she had to stomp. Each step an interdict. "I won’t talk to—”

"Emily, no.” Standing his ground. Freezing. "I have to get back to work.”

"Work?" with such scorn her face was ugly, "you're *working* in there? On what? Black magic?"

Stan, bubbling silent and silver. Makeshift easel but he could work with almost nothing, he had black and green and red, he had two brushes, he had masonite board. In his back a small hinging agony, bent for hours in one relentless crouch; his bladder, just emptied, felt loose as a balloon. All of him stunk, he would not have met her inside. Even now his hands itched, an invisible pulling inside his flesh as if the skin itself stretched for what it wanted. He had been locked in the room with Stan all day. Working.

"He knows what's wrong with me." Hands on the railing, like the half-unseen that glittering swell against the tired meat of his eyes, how to make her understand. And quickly. Work to do. "He can see what I see."

"Sure he can." Sour with disbelief. "I bet he sees whatever you tell him."

It's not like that, it's not *like* that. Her hands sharp triangular in the pockets of her coat, her eyes opaque; was she even listening at all? "Emily, you used to understand, you used to listen to me when I talked about painting. Remember? About art, we used to say all those things, we used to talk about inspiration and how—"

"Oh *please*—"

"Wait, listen. Remember how we used to say that inspiration isn't just something that's part of you but something larger than yourself, that it comes over you, into you, it's a force that—"

"How can you be this dumb," snow in her face, shouting now. "He's telling you what you want to hear, you asshole, that's why you're falling for it!"

"No," passionate, leaning forward so in his weakness he trembled, the muscles of his legs having to work much harder to support his swaying weight. "He's right, he's," how to *explain,* oh God, "it's like a force that rides you, it takes over and—"

"Oh *God,* Austen, no wonder you're swallowing this shit. It's your same old rap, remember?" Narrowed eyes into the wind; cruel eyes. He felt tears in his own, it was colder by the minute now, her stare was flat as the edge of a cliff. "We had this conversation ten years ago: your art's simultaneously at fault for everything *and* in the driver's seat. You're a driven man. It's the same old Art 101 bullshit that I thought you grew out of. Can't you take responsibility for *anything*? Ever?"

Cold.

"Oh Emily," please. Just please.

Russell, now, at the foot of the stairs, squinting up in the new dark and "Are you coming to eat or what?" but Austen saw she was past hearing, she knew already, she was turning away. Pushing past Russell and into the car, head silhouette against the headrest. Russell yelling again but he did not feel he owed an answer, stepping back inside to shut the door.

The door locks from the inside.

"Violator. Protractor. Constrictor. Dominator. These are the four stages," said the doctor, "the four manifestations of duende. And fear is the border."

Oil paint, a greasy smell. Eating a handful of dried walnuts, ancient as mummified insects, their taste like nothing at all. Water in a Dixie cup.

"And past the border," passing back behind Stan's bed, adjusting with a delicacy both unconscious and sure the faint unwanted twist of a tube, "past that border *is* duende."

Imagining it, one walnut against his gums hard and plump as an abscess. The gray wasteland, borderland and past it no man's land at all, the hut and burning palace, the gutter, the place where every color is burning black. Elongation, fatal stretch, where your head is banded like a screaming monkey's, the place where every toolbox is empty, where the only tool is the caveman clench and hollow of pain and anger and the desire so strong it breaks the hands that use it, yes. Beyond it is work. Beyond it is the limbic whine, soul's heart beating in the rain that is always silver, silver and no color at all. Where pain is currency, and work is more than work. Where every real creator wants to be.

On the bed Stan made no sound, but both turned as if he had.

"You can go there. You can *live* there if you want." Silence. "Not everyone can. But you can. I see it here," tapping the air before the new embryo painting, the smeared black like shit, like bloody feces looped from a shaggy bowel. "I saw it in your face when you were having that seizure. I want to see," leaning back, "everything you see."

Murmur, shifting the nut in his mouth. "So does Russell."

"Who, your friend? No," shaking his head. "He's worthless. Your wife, now, she's a different story," grinning, teeth long in the feeble wash of the

monitor lights, the idiot dark, "she’s a whole different *book.* I’d like very much to make friends with her, but.” The shrug that means impossible. "How long were you two married?”

"Eight years.”

"And how long divorced?"

"Almost two years. Two years in March.”

“She’s a formidable woman. Did you fuck much, when you were married?"

Surprised into forgotten juvenile abashment, looking at his nails. Chips and cracks, opaque lumps as if routinely hammered. "Yeah, we— yeah. We did.”

"Sex is a bridge, too, or it can be. Have you ever heard of the Most Wishful Sons of Haiti? It’s a messianic order, its credo is ‘Sex and power through brotherhood.’ I was a member, for a while.” Shuffle of walnuts against the slope of the jar. Silence again.

"Why’d you quit?”

"I didn't want to be anybody’s brother.”

This time no mistaking a grumble, unearthly from that simmering torso upon the silent bed and the doctor’s smile, showing no teeth at all.

Austen, rising.

Back to work.

10

The relief made him shiver, his hands shook, hectic merry rhythm as he worked. Work work work. Alone with Stan in the middle of the night, the doctor presumably gone to find him more paint, create some, pull it jerked and screaming like roots from the bloody earth, no difference now because he had to work. Because he understood.

Ah, God, what a blessed state: like sainthood, like martyrdom, the vortex of satori and he blissful in its eye; or blissful if he stopped to take notice; furious, too, but no time for that either. Only work. Drugged by circumstance enriched to this rare state past feeling, the room did not trouble him, its closeness or smells; there were plenty of smells. Stan's quiet bubbles. The brush between his fingers, slim texture like a whittled bone. His shirt felt faintly crusty, neck rimmed with sweat in layers. Dry-eyed. See the paint, so thick in spots it would not dry for days.

It made *sense,* now, lay like a template, legend for a map of the time between then and now. Sickness and seizures folding backward into aimlessness, nothingness; his desperation in those last real working days, portraits no one wanted, work no one accepted or could accept. Not even himself, because he *knew*, portraits, all of them, not of the subjects but instead of his own imperfect grope for duende, abandoned unwisely; then. Fallow, and stupid to think he could run from it, drive it away by manufactured distance or sloth. Because: *see:* at last imploding through pain and drugs the forced confrontation: you motherfucker I'll pin you to the ground. How low can you go?

Some things cannot be escaped.

Vision. Look at me.

It made *sense,* it was so true it hurt to know he had missed it, all this time. All this time! and what terrible waste. But he was done wasting now. If sacrifice was the bridge, he had already crossed it; heading, now, for the border.

Black. Heavy cypress color, his arm hard on the paint, Stan's machines wending their relentless electrical way. Artificial light: there were no windows in this room. Like infection the work denied will force its way out, like seeping blood filling the bursting brain to explosion; it finds, or creates, its own avenue. That Dr. Quiet would know this, be able to express it so simply and easily, as if he spoke of the weather or a cup of tea, chimed coincidence past miracle; a sign. His attempt to paint the silver thing: another sign, the part of him that knew trying to instruct the part oblivious. *Duende,* a word for what cannot be adequately named; but he *knew.* Emily or no, he was sure of it now.

He could make her sure, too, he knew it. There was work aplenty, not maybe time enough but he was *good,* now, better than ever, better than before possible because he knew what he was doing, the veil was stripped. If he had time he could certainly convince her; it was no new notion; she used to talk with him about these same things, about the purposes inherent in all good work, in work done at the highest possible pitch. About struggle.

If all real art is confrontation, then war is the only possible sublimity.

When this was over, he would sit her down and explain.

Maybe—stopping to piss, an empty coffee can crusted with iron and minerals less true, dick in hand and sloppy spray, impatient to get back to work—maybe it could seem unbalanced, un*hinged,* what he was doing here, stuck in this room like a bug in a jar, sweating, painting, closeted with a man so far past death, he had presumably entered some heightened period of hyperlife, or hyperdeath; but wasn't the ability to make a case for his own possible craziness proof that he was not? (And yet in the chuckling dark, Stan's dark, did it matter? What mattered there?) If only he could make Emily understand the peace, the relief of finally, finally finding the one person who was neither intimidated by nor ignorant of his true condition, who could help and would. The place, the premonition at the end of all the roads, if she truly understood she would be happy for him. Happy.

Dr. Quiet, behind him, watching. For how long.

"Here," big grocery bag in hand. Paints, presumably, inside. "Are you hungry?"

"No.” Was he? No time. “No, I’ll, I’m going to get back to work now.” Tardy realization that he was already back at his easel, his Masonite tilt.

"This is wonderful,” indicating with one finger long slopes of heavy color, something there in the belly, something very ugly indeed: "That’s violence,” said the doctor, dry approval. "Believe me. That is violence there." His pause. "I once treated a man who tried to kill a seventeen-year-old pizza delivery girl with a garden hose. His attorney used the crocodile brain defense, which basically postulated an abnormal biochemistry that caused the man to become temporarily violent by acting on his limbic system. *Limbic* is Latin for border, did you know that?”

Violence, in black and sable green; bituminous colors. The doctor reached as if to touch, but knew better. ‘There’s violence in all of us. You want to do a lot of things, only you’re afraid.” The colors. "Don’t be afraid.”

Austen found reds in the bag, different variants, cobalt blue. Black. "Is this it?"

‘There's a lot there.” Sigh for Austen’s continued silence: “Next time I’ll get more.” Professional assessment of Stan’s position, checking his drips; a good innkeeper takes care of all his guests. Austen’s half glance, half pondering: What if silver ran through all those tubes, all at once? Would it wake him up? What would Stan be like, awake? Red on his makeshift palette. There was a small piece of Masonite, cracked across the top like a fissure in dehydrated flesh. The digital clock on one of Stan’s monitors read 2:42 a.m.

"I’ll leave you alone now," Dr. Quiet said.

Swiveling, head turned, brush already dipped, little dip, in heavy red. “Can you—” moved by something, no name for it now. The colors hungry. "What’s your real name?"

The doctor smiled. The door, closing, made no real sound at all.

Calling to him, "Austen,” through the door. ‘Telephone. It’s your ex-wife.”

The cramping, incredible, his knees were killing him the moment he tried to use them. The clock said 9:55. Like working in the car, all those sketches, the time passing without leaving memory behind.

"Wait,” creaky knees. “I’ll talk to her, wait a minute,” movement’s vertigo, he put out his hand for balance and found it resting soft against

Stan’s body; the breathing flesh breathing not at all. Touching the phone, he felt still that imprint, the leavening touch; brother in the transformation of severe cerebral accident. I don’t want to be anybody’s brother.

"Hello?" Voice wet somehow, grinding sound when he tried to clear it. "Emily? Where are you?"

"I’m going home." Pay phone rattle, her voice already distant. "I won’t, I refuse to hang around waiting for a tragedy to happen, I’m going home. Don’t call me. Don’t let that asshole call me or that asshole doctor either, don’t list me as next of kin—’’

Dizzy, "You promised me you’d wait a week, you said—’’

"I can’t wait a week. I can’t wait anymore. Sitting around in McDonald’s or that horrible room, with that stupid bastard you wished on me, Austen, I want to go home.”

'Then," hurry, hurry, think of something, *hurry*, “then go to our house. Wait for me there.”

A dry noise, did she laugh? "No,” sound like passing traffic, trucks and cars, the daily business of a world he had somehow become so far separated from as to forget its workaday existence, or view it as exotic and exotically maintained. “No. I’m going to my own house. I hope you get better, I really do. I don’t think you will, but I hope you do.”

Blood in his temples, Emily please don’t. "Emily!” An empty phone. Pressing his mouth, hard, to the plastic, warm with desperate breath. "Emily, oh,” like a groan, the sound an animal makes the second after roadkill, closing his eyes in the moment’s trench to open them

to silver.

And this time he did not *care,* he would not flinch or run, let it come. Let it, sourceless and sticky beneath his feet, trellis-climb up his aching legs, thin creeper ribbons with kudzu speed and he the sick Colossus, eyes open, wide this time to see the doctor across the room, staring, staring

as it rose, hydra

to his mouth

and he bit *down, hard,* I’ll chew you to bits, you fuck, I’ll eat you alive. Grinding, slippery as skinned meat but with less substance, like gnawing the flesh of dreams. Hands clawed toward his face, touching nothing; in his mouth, no longer creep but flowing crawl down past throat into lungs, coated in it, beauty beauty beauty and it rose inside his eyes, dominance, like a glass bulb filling with precious mercury, platinum and pure.

Struggling against the airlessness, crawling himself now to the other room, Stan’s room, toppling into things as he passed them, knocking heedless to the floor the mallard tray, it struck his back, he was at the door of the room. Red mingling with the silver before his eyes. Like looking up from the ocean floor, the depth of a trench at which hell’s back door sat fat and placid, waiting, waiting; but he was through with waiting now. To the easel.

Skittering shove and the door stayed open, he was across the floor, he was passing the sheeted altar, hospital-cornered, bubbles and wires and Stan, sitting up in bed.

The doctor following, behind him in the doorway, Austen heard through his glassy ears some cry but no time to listen.

Rising before the easel

and slamming with all his strength his head against the Masonite, into the wound of red and black, back and forth his smearing face and he could not breathe at all, now, no air into those clotting lungs, paint on his mouth as bitter as blood and slipping with his falling body into the arrest of silent strangulation

where he was awaited by eyes. Wide open as his own.

And wakened by Dr. Quiet, is there a doctor in the house? Yes? Who to treat first, dead Stan or dying Austen? and he wanted to smile, what lucky spots he chose for his aborted deaths. The tube up his nose like an old iconic friend.

“Austen?"

One eye was blind.

“Austen, can you speak to me?”

A different voice now, twice different in fact: the professional flat overlay like cheap butter on the heavy landscape below of excitation; but the hands were calm and busy, their touch the touch of the nurses in the hospital, of all the doctors in all the fruitless offices and tables flat and cold. He was on the cot angled next to Stan, who was apparently still more or less dead. From his right eye he saw the doctor duct-taping Stan’s resistless wrists to the raised sides of the hospital bed; dull silver against dull silver and in between the sorry stalk of yellowing flesh.

"I hear you," Austen said. He tried to sit up but was immediately punctured by a headache the black ferocity of which frightened him; if he hurt this bad, something was really wrong. "My head hurts," he said.

"I believe," Dr. Quiet leaving Stan, let the dead bury their dead, to review what seemed to be a makeshift chart clipboarded to the cot, "we're dealing with an infarct."

"Stroke?" Working his blind eye, maybe it was not permanently so, maybe he had damaged it somehow by striking the painting. Which from his post, now, he could not see. Irony. What had happened, those minutes ago? Thrombus, embolus, infarct, hemorrhage, the chant of the rosary of bloody death. He knew the words and symptoms, could with time enough expound upon each like the formal tableaux of Greek mythology, here is the swan, the pitcher, the cave of unhappy knowledge. Here is the river of blood, here the dam, here the pale death that comes from the source of the pallor itself.

"You have head pain?"

A long grin, he was half crazy, the pain was making even his blind eye water. Was it paint he tasted on his teeth? "Like a motherfucker, yes." And his laughter, inappropriate, he had to gasp for air but at least he could gasp.

"How's your vision?"

"Half gone."

"Can you see me?"

"Only your good side," and without warning an enormous throb and the silver rose up like a rattler in his throat, he could feel the muscles strain in independent terror against it, his head, weak thrash in no escape and behind it the merciful avalanche of pain that took him past silver and all the way into the dark.

"—know what it is."

The doctor, talking. To him? On the phone? The phone. No, the door.

"He's sleeping, now. I gave him an injection about an hour ago and he's been sleeping ever since."

Emily?

Everything hurt, beaten feeling especially around the chest; how often could that keep happening without something permanent taking its place? but the terrible headache had gone.

The painting faced him, propped, grotesque, against Stan. With both eyes now he saw an incredible smear across that central blackness, viscous as tissue, plasma wet and sweet; it spoke both harsh and subtly of deeps and distances unsounded; it was brute, and inexplicable, something he had believed beyond his own skill to create, yet if ever there was a portrait, this was it: and the subject duende, what drives the engine that powers the soul.

A man's voice, half angry and half plaintive, and the doctor's a little louder, "Not yet. Come on back in about an hour. Or two. You want him to be awake enough to talk to, don't you?" The indistinct reply. "All right then," and the door closing. Click.

The bedroom door opening. "Austen," but rote, as if expecting no reply.

"Yeah," not wanting to try sitting up, moving, things were fine as they were. "I'm awake. Who was that?"

"Your friend Russell. He came up from downstairs to see you."

Confused; dry, dry tongue and mouth, like papery meat. "Downstairs?"

"Yes. He's staying there," said the doctor. "He's with Elaine now," and he laughed, small and appreciative, as at an esoteric quip. "He wanted very much to get in here and see what you're doing. I think what he really wants is to be you. Without the mess."

Mess, right. Bodily inventory, that dry feel. IV, nose tubes, had the doctor pirated equipment from poor old Stan? Last seen sitting upright. "How's Stan?" and in the moment after asking, confused by the question too.

"Stan's dead," calmly. "I took him off the respirator. Thought I was going to need it for you, actually." Stan's tape-shackled wrist, the wet strange feeling of guilt. Dr. Quiet seemed to know: "Don't feel bad," he said. "He was a corpse anyway." Bending toward him, penlight in hand, ahoy the drill. "You know what to do," he said.

"What happened to me?" as his pupils grew and shrunk in presumably proper order and direction; as he reacted if not smoothly then with stumbling correctitude to the choreography of sensation, prickling here, tickling there, light touch, painful touch, no touch at all. "You said I had a stroke."

"Austen," pushing back, finally. "I'm not a neurologist. But people don't get better the way you just did, and certainly never this quickly with only the benefit of some grade-Z morphine analog and a little nursing. A

little more than an hour ago you were blind in one eye and complaining of extreme head pain, you were—”

his body jerked, minutely, shock like a finger in a socket and both eyes washed silver in less than a blink but not a constraining color, not blinding because he could see through them; but differently, the tilt of sheer distortion like staring from inside an eye sac without full benefit of lens, the doctor’s face a wet puzzle of angles and planes, of eyes foreign in their glance and moving lips

like breathing underwater, present silver, it had never left this time at all. Fallow; is that the joke? and he thought, Oh. This is the one, pressure in his chest, rib bones twisting as if the raw marrow itself had come impatient to life; sitting up, no pain, no air but what was left in his squeezing lungs, this is where I strangle like that guy in the john, right? Right?

Off the bed. Dragging wires. Spurt of tube and that new vision enormously improved, he was at the painting, taking it from the easel that was Stan and pressing himself against it, hard, *pushing,* chest pain and the tinny sound of the doctor crying out as

raising himself, the painting, bringing both down with force impossible across the silent peace of Stan, shattering his dead skull, liquid and chatter of smelly bone rock-skipping across the painting’s surface, heavy oil and the living paint of silver

and he put his mouth in the center of the mess and screamed and screamed and screamed

for air

eyes open, forced open, the jockeying writhe of bone in his chest more livid and seeing in new vision the life of eyes, responding, not hungry but the god of hunger, not desire but what desire wants.

Screaming.

More tubes, this time, a greater pain and very little breath. Sluggish vision but all his own, and “You are one strong motherfucker," said the doctor, without admiration, retaping one slack wrist to hold the skittish IV; in Stan’s bed, now.

“Is," almost asking for Emily, remembering in time. God it was *hot* in here, everything smells worse when it’s hot. “Is Russell here?"

“He came up a little while ago. I sent him out for chicken and beer. You can have a beer too if you quit trying to kill me.” Gently testing the IV tube,

satisfied. 'Take a look at your painting,” he said, and got out of the way.

No need to sit, he was already cranked there: thoughtful. At first the room beyond the doctor’s form was blurred, his eyes in their old orbits maybe lazy but then he saw it, felt his taped hand clench and the tiny vibration of the IV as his pulse jumped, hard, lip between his teeth and he stared, stared.

Colors, wet to death, a maelstrom’s worth of black and brainy pink, ugly fleshly color and gray, horrible; the sheer geometry of expiration and what waits, the instant after the last big leap, and stands teeth bared before the border.

Portraiture, insistent as war. The step beyond art.

Still staring. Sweat on his lip, now, half-conscious raptor’s gripe of his hand against the steel bar, had Stan ever grabbed it this way? Stan’s head cracked open and sticky on the Masonite, he remembered the force of the blow but not the blow itself. His sweat tasted strange and saltless, like plasma, or innocent tears, the way a picture cries. In the corner of the room, black and small against the chair-leg easel for the painting, lay the camcorder, red eye closed and snout discreetly down. For now.

No chicken, no beer, no Russell. No doctor back to check on him, nothing but the room, wondering in what disposing clutch had gone poor Stan, the discomfort of the IV tube, Dr. Quiet was not so deft as the hospital nurses had been. He had to piss in growing urgency and finally lurched himself upright, found within reach a bedpan as thick-lipped and distressingly blue as the old one back at Camp Brainiac, was nothing ever going to permanently change? Get used to it. Was he especially hardheaded or just stupid? Swaying as he pissed, some of it on the floor in a pool as clear as a wish and he wished for nothing, for him this was the painting to end all paintings, this black release more potent than any lifeblood. Well. Maybe this was the end of it, doctrine of duende preached and maybe now that it had wrung from him better than his best he would be free, at last, to go. Nowhere but down. Emily would say that was typically defeatist. Emily had also bailed out, yesterday? Day before? His memory was patternless, unsure as thawing ice, nowhere to step and say, This place is safe. Possibly half the things he remembered were less than half of what had actually gone on. Maybe there were more things crusted to that Masonite board than we dream of, heaven and earth in our imaginings; how did it go, he couldn’t

remember that either. There was silver in the joining angles of the walls, the secret corners like the creases of an unpleasant smile. He lay waiting for its movement but fell instead to sleep, breathing hard, unconscious of the sound of the respirator, the ticking of blood through tiring veins.

Awake again. Dr. Quiet's back was to him; he was talking softly into a microrecorder, one hand shading mouth from view. He looked like an old witch at someone's bedside, thin knees in baggy denim, hair brambled, unkempt. There was a video tape balanced on one knee, as if he could not trust it out of his reach.

"Where's Russell?" Voiceless. The painting was gone, or at least past his vision. He tried again. "Where's Russell at?"

The doctor's start, interrupted by a dead man; then shook his head; red-eyed, patienceless smile. Shut up so I can get back to work. "I don't know. He never showed up."

"You said, you," distracted by the tricky motion of silver, diluted, almost milkily opaque through the tubes in his arm, the ones running small and brisk from his itching nostrils, "you said he was, he was going to—what the *fuck* is wrong now?" and scratching out the tubes with almost silly ease, it was very easy indeed to move, he felt nothing worse than weak, he felt in fact somewhat good. Good. Wonderful. He threw the tubes across the room and sat straight up in bed, silver still running from his nose like pesky snot. Fine. The doctor said something that he did not hear, swinging legs sideways over the hindering bars, standing up.

"I want to work," he said. "Where're my paints?"

"I think you ought to just—"

"I said, where are my paints?" and found it easy to be angry, too, found it easy to swat the micro from the doctor's hand, to poke a finger at his red eyes. Wide eyes. "I feel fine," not wanting to seem rude, or crazy, that was it, the doctor was staring at him as if he were completely crazy this time. Sometimes Russell had had that look but never to this extremity. Where was Russell, anyway?

"Where's Russell?"

Silence. The doctor's gauging stare. A smell in the room like old-fashioned liniment, thick and minty and sickly sweet.

"And while we're at it," how heavy his blood felt, moving through his veins, how brisk the silver river from his nose; impossible to wipe it all

Apparently there was something coming from his ears, too, he could feel it warm on his jawbone, trickle against his neck. “Where’s Stan?”

Nothing. No answer, nothing, as if he had no spoken at all. “I said, where’s Stan?”

The doctor’s voice very small now. Pushed against the back of the chair as if he were afraid. "In the morgue.”

"What’d you do, dump him there?”

"No, it wasn’t—’’ tinny voice and past it the sound of a car door, someone’s radio, bass. The outside world. Imagine. "Austen, I really believe you ought to at least be—’’

“What day is it?” realizing as he asked that an; answer was meaningless; Thursday, the eighteenth, yeah. Yeah. He found his paints under the bed. The Masonite was gone. Very well, he would paint on the walls. Wouldn't Peter be proud. He would have to call Peter one of these days, drive him up here to experience Austen’s Mural Period. If he ran out of paints, he could stick the brush up his nose.

Something hurting in the back of his neck.

Starting, as always, with black, and the frown of the doctor, close by, "You need to—” and Austen said, “Shut *up,”* and pushed him, not too hard, the pain in his neck flaring a little in concert with the motion, the freshet from his nose paradoxically decreasing; a little. A little. The phone began to ring, strange little buzz like a European siren. Dr. Quiet, distracted in two directions, took the video, left the camcorder. Austen painted its circling lens black, then struck it against the wall. Lightly. No unnecessary force. A part of him stood screaming in vast blank pissworthy terror, none of this is you, *none* of this is *you* anymore but he really had no time for that, worry is time-consuming and there were better paths to consummation. He wasn’t getting any younger, anyway, and

there was work to do.

The sensory pleasure of the moving brush. Little room, little walls, too much crap in here: liquor store boxes of old medical magazines; a bag of yellowed bandages still wrapped in their red-crossed paper; some empty specimen bottles in a greenish plastic tote. Kicking it all aside, out of his path, bags and boxes, plastic crushed beneath his bare feet. Something stuck in his heel, brief pierce and he ignored it, ignored the ache in his neck flaring to impair with pain his darkening vision. The colors, he could do so much with so little now. Look at all the textures and shades of black, plain

black, pure black, muscular like his aching arm, burning inside. Without smoke or smell or substance, burns but is not destroyed, burns like the sorrow that tells you you will never live forever, there is work to do and you will never do it, there is beauty burning black in the palace of duende and you will never see it, never touch it, never be seen by it and known in a way that no human thought can know; it can burn you alive, but you will never get close enough to the heat. Never. Because to get there drastic steps are needed, and your feet are too tender, your pains too small. Big pain is the toll for this country, to cross the border where the air itself is glass burned black, where every movement is the product of a distillation so intense that mere presence demands from you an effort beyond anything that you have ever given, not only live and die for your art but become it, go past it, eat it bloody and alive and make it over to devour again and again like Cronus eating his children, ignoring their screams because what is is what must be and in all the rooms in the house of art there is only one altar, one half-seen silver priest and one demand

and Dr. Quiet back in the room, darting like a child for a puppy and wailing, wailing over his camcorder, "You asshole! You *asshole!”* actually cradling it; technophiliac. The old ways are best. Austen hit him, but still lightly, with the brush, tapped him one brisk reproving blow across the bridge of his nose and shook his head a little at the blood, what a pussy, he had barely touched him. Barely, and *look* at the wall, what he had done, see the crisp corrosion and all the beauty he had ever devised in the terror of his wandering eyes, he had not wandered for nothing, it was here he was meant to be. The end of the road. Kill or cure. Or both.

Dr. Quiet’s head, somehow, beneath his knee, a thoughtful posture, the doctor perhaps less so. Fish mouth, and Austen sympathetic, though distantly, he of all people could understand what it was like to go without air; a unique sensation.

And Russell, blowing in like a thunderstorm, wild in the doorway and staring: as if caught making love, instead making war and Austen swiveling his hungry mouth toward him as if to say Want some? His shirt was soaked with silver. The muscles of his arm burned and bunched.

"Mother*fuck*,” Russell’s eyes as comedy-wide as at sight of a ghost. Hands on the door frame, catching himself in the act of entrance. Foolhardy. "Austen," high-voiced, "let him up, man.”

"Why?”

“ ’Cause I think he’s choking.”

There was something on the ceiling, some moving wisps like silver smoke. A new manifestation? *In*festation? Why not? “He said you took off. He said he sent you out for beer and you never came back.”

“He’s full of shit," but still those wide eyes, the look he’d had in the car. "Austen, shit, man! Let him up!”

Silent, raising his knee which even to him felt light as balsa wood, as if it were no human limb at all; what’s the fuss? "How do you like it?” to Russell, who was inexplicably preoccupied by the doctor, still on the floor, if he wanted to get up so bad, then why didn’t he? Asshole. "He’s mad at me,” smearing a long circlet of red, "because I broke his camcorder.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“I don’t know.” Did he? “I didn’t want him to tape me when I was crazy. Like he did to all those other people.”

"What other people?" and then in the same breath, "Austen, man, you look really fucking horrible, what the hell’s going on up here anyway? I been trying to get in for the last two days, Emily took off, she was pissed off out of her mind and then that girl downstairs, Elaine, she started getting __’’

"He said”—to the crablike hunch of the doctor, back to him, still on the floor—“you left and didn’t come back. Which makes him a liar, I guess,” and felt, vaguely, like hitting him again but realized he’d better work instead, time was running out. Why? Not getting any younger. "Listen, Russell, I really have to get back to work here.” The brush in his hand. "Can you come back in a while?”

Dr. Quiet, risen now, walking like an old man; he was an old man, Austen realized, this must be very strenuous indeed. Time for some of his own tonic, Florida water, Vete de Aqui; better living through brotherhood. But he didn’t want to be anybody’s brother, did he? Tremor, beckoning to Russell and Austen nodded, yes, a good idea. ‘Take him with you,” unsure to whom he was actually speaking, both of you get the fuck out. Busy busy busy.

And working.

And the smell of paint, the room so hot and filled with that hungry odor, the smell of bodiless flesh. Silver damp beneath his peeling nails. When he pissed again, blood in the stream. An ache in his back like a slow continuous batter, boom boom boom. But quietly.

The wall his canvas now, terrors and the elements of dream: his dreams: Emily's toolbox, the dream of his blackened penis, the monkey's head in its strangle of surgical vise; elongation in a desolate setting, flatland, badland, borderland, the country of duende. It was approachable, he thought, even to him, maybe especially to him, sick, broke, estranged, in exile in a stranger's house, losing everything and everything subsumed for this last enormous push: it had forced him through pain to work, it was still forcing him, through greater pain, to greater work. Yes. He had filled half the wall before he fell, and lay fallen, head abutting the slew of a cardboard box, neck at once so frozen by pain he could barely turn it but he did, forcing the muscles to move, to rotate his dry and happy eyes to see what he had done. At last, past the dryness, tears, little human tears on his hand so stiff with spasm he could not unclench his fingers to wipe them gone. Both his legs were without sensation, numb as meat in a freezer. His nose hurt where the tubes had been, his throat as well. A pressure was building in the sore spots behind his crying eyes, and he cried for that too; in the dirt of the floor his tears were silver, sweet and alienating chrome for the sight of the border, still burning in the dark behind his eyes.

Without surety of sleep, awakening like coming out of the seizures; same thing. Dr. Quiet there again, prudent distance this time. Cups on the mallard tray, faint steam. The wall still incredible with his work.

"Hey," and Austen felt unable to look freely at him. The doctor had a Band-Aid on his nose, right at the bridge. For himself he felt as bad as he ever had in the hospital, could barely credit the half notion of well-being. "Is Russell still here?" Safe topic, or at least it seemed so, until memory told him differently.

"He's downstairs." Flat. "I told him to leave. He wants to call your ex-wife and try to get her to come back." Picking up one of the cups, a mug stenciled pale with some creeping pink flowers, vines, handing it to Austen. "You better eat that. You keep ripping out the IVs."

'Thanks." His neck still hurt but he said nothing, cup in hand and a flexible straw, for some reason it made him feel sad. Vague bouillon taste, all hot and salt, faint flavor of meat undefined.

"You're a lot stronger," the doctor said.

No I'm not, I'll be lucky to get out of here in one piece and not crazy. But he said none of it, sucked the straw like a good boy. Nausea immediate

at the passage of soup, stand back, he wanted to say, it's coming up. Warmth between his legs, looked down to see himself wearing some ancient stranger gym shorts, now wet, peeling back the elastic for a disgusted peek: and blood. I'm pissing blood, he almost said, but didn't. Instead, "I pissed myself," and the doctor rising, handing him a roll of paper towels printed with blue windmills and mean-looking Dutch boys. Trying to wipe the blood and making only a heavy smear.

"Doctor," the balled-up towel in hand. Sticky fingers. "Listen—"

"You're getting very dangerous," not in answer or response, the tone they use to tell you that what you have is inoperable. "Now I can't even get near enough to tape you anymore." Was he talking about the camcorder or restraints? "This work that you're doing, it's amazing, but it's not safe to be around. There's a process here that's partially medical in nature—I'm guessing a little. But I think it has to do with the tissue scarred from the accident. There's a pattern of behavior that—"

and without any warning whatsoever the tray flipping up, hot soup flying, the doctor's startled curse and Austen standing straight up in bed, legs flexed, blood on his thighs, eyes wide open and he could *see* it, it was no seizure, he could see the silver thing, scales, the long eyes and stretch and hunch, its shadowless movements like the path of light through water, surface sheen and it was right there, it was *right there*

showing itself

on the cusp of the border and as he stepped to meet it promptly fell, clumsy feet in the blanket and striking his forehead hard against the metal bed frame and now there was blood in his eyes, seeing not stars but the simple cold components of his own astrologies, a zodiac where all the figures were one and that one compelled by no outer vision, no eyes at all but its own.

Slow to get up. Still tangled. Bleeding. All kinds of shit coming out of his nose and ears, leakage, they had warned him in the hospital about this kind of stuff. They had warned him not to stop taking his pills but what pharmaceutical leash could be devised to hold this thing, where was the cage, who could keep such a key? Not him. He was vessel, not jailer, he could never be the one.

Dr. Quiet, grunting or crying, flat on his ass on the floor, dark and stained across his crotch and middle, maybe piss, maybe soup. Burned, maybe. A look on his face like the sounds he made.

The door, people, in his own wet distraction he could barely discern if they were up or down, in or out, even the doctor's noises were as if they were not. His mouth was open; something there that was neither saliva, nor blood, nor exactly silver. The silver thing still crouching, a shadow now along its sides like the country beyond its sentinel stance and with pain great enough he could go there

if he could pass it

with sacrificial strength

Voices, inside the room.

Emily’s voice.

His name in her mouth, like fire, she was screaming something and one hand upraised and over her shoulder he saw Russell’s slapstick face again, staring, and he glared back at them both, why *now,* so *close* and he did not want to have to stop for them, even for her: for explanations, arguments, wrangles, he was so close now, couldn’t they see the work on the walls? Get out, "Get her out of here!" but it was too late, the silver thing was turning toward her voice and though there was something almost evil in its motion he knew there was nothing to worry about, he would definitely keep anything bad from happening to Emily, keep her from the maelstrom, the carnage path, the path beneath the skin that everyone walks but only the artist can see, can see with his own eyes

“Austen!”

The doctor before him, in the path that led to Emily, pushing, hitting him, hitting with the camcorder for fuck's sake, give it *up* and Austen hit him back, very hard, once.

Silver everlasting.

The painting on the wall was alive.

He could no longer see Emily as a figure, as a separate thing, as a human being, heard her shriek through the subsumption of liquid: everything on him was wet, his body felt like a splitting sac. For moments he could see nothing at all, tiny mimic of the hospital blackout, those missing days in these missing minutes and then returning, in the ravenous clutch of that liquid he turned at last to the silver thing, bent and stretched before the wall painting, living writhing background and turned hands out, mouth open, eat or be eaten or both together and at once. Fuck with *me,* now. Now.

Like passing through water. Like the ocean of desire. Warm and wet like mother's blood, the blood of the one you love, like the heedless bodiless passion of creation itself where nothing matters, nothing exists but the work. Beginning its own existence, at everything's expense. And always worth it, every second, every squirming drop of blood. Everything. Because there can be nothing else.

Because there is nothing else.

A man, the doctor or Russell.

Touching him?

He opened his eyes and saw the face above him, skin flushed an intense and singular gray, each hair of Russell's head frosted to a degree of delineation impossible for the human eye to experience. Gray, and white along the bones, the angles, with every motion it differed, daggers and slippery slopes in the infinite range from silver to silver-gray. Russell, touching him once and gingerly and it was all he could do to keep from laughing in his pleasure and surprise; touched him and left him there.

Staring at everything.

Cold pungency of urine, medicine spilled brassy and the dry odor of blood. Thin irritation in his mouth, like hair; Emily's hair. More of Emily's hair a sticky jumble on the clipboard, on the lumpy edge of the cot. The room was all debris, bed tipped, in the corner some wet jumbled pile like the hump of a broken body. Pieces of door and furniture everywhere, little war's aftermath. Battlefield. He had certainly won; he was certain of that.

Looking to Russell to see him wiping at his face, blood there. Tears. Whatever had been happening must have just stopped. Russell was bent to the doctor, talking into his ear, wrong-speed voice through snot and hurry.

"She came back," panting, weeping mouth open like a little kid's, "she came back to tell him about the pictures. That guy, it's all turned to one big picture, man, it's all the same fucking thing. All that one thing, she came, oh *Jesus''* as if he did not even hear himself talk, shock's babble and staring back, wild, it was as if he did not see Austen at all.

"Russell," the way you talk to a scared dog, nice doggie, come out from under the car. "I saw it, Russell. What your dad sees," but Russell wasn't listening. Dragging at the doctor, words that made no sense.

"Russell!" loud, and Russell's swivel, turning literally on his heel. Looking straight at him.

"You killed her," in that weird gasping babble, “oh you fucking killed her, man, you went right for her, you went right—" Crying in earnest now, "Oh *man,"* and Austen’s own weaving gaze at the doctor, he spent a lot of time on the floor, didn’t he? He almost pointed this out but Russell was lifting the doctor’s body, he seemed to have no trouble doing it and it seemed to Austen’s incurious gaze that the doctor had no eyes anymore, just jelly in orbit, just stuff stuffed in sockets. Strange, or maybe not strange at all, certainly not as strange as Russell’s stupid accusations. Still, no time to speculate, he could anyway do it later, he had all the time he needed and he needed it all. Because there was work to do, plenty, for one thing he couldn’t find his paints. Or his brushes. Maybe it didn’t matter, but he had to find out. And had to, too, find a way to manage this new vision, he had meant to mention it to Russell, maybe he still could. The confrontation, or whatever, the slippery blast of essential meeting had seemed to take in its leaving the leavings of his old eyesight; and left him thus gifted. Not like the doctor; new eyes entirely.

Crawling across the floor. Hard to stand, right now, but it would get easier. What was especially and wonderfully difficult was the management of these new eyes, mimicking as they did something in some way familiar, a process, there was a name for it. Yes. Solarization, a photographic technique in which the image’s immediate border is contaminated by the developing action and everything ends in silver: messy, unpredictable, bizarre. His borders too contaminated, in fact erased, overridden by, yes, a developing action. His ultimate development, perhaps he should have been a photographer rather than a painter.

But he could be anything he wanted, now.

He could even be the silver thing.

He wanted to ask Russell about Emily, force him to make sense: nobody was dead here, that was stupid, stupid and evil to say. Into the outer room to find him but Russell had apparently gone off with the doctor; took him to the hospital, ha ha. Emily’s purse was still on the floor, by the endless buzz of the TV tuned to an empty tape; a sugary bubble of her vomit, he could smell it from across the room. With his new eyes he saw on the dull vinyl surface of her purse each fingerprint, the intricacy of whorl upon whorl and each imprinted with his love for her, he could read it in her very cells. Did she love him? Had she ever? Did it matter?

Where was she now?

Her coat, there. See in its fresh-torn fabric the sweet weave of his devotion, see in the spotty puzzle of blood a rebus that spoke of his care. Where had she gone without her coat? She would be cold. He would get her another coat, clothe her in silver. He would kiss her silver, inside and out.

His movements felt the same, perhaps more cautious as these new eyes were tricky things, he kept wanting to stop and stare at everything he saw. Outside, downstairs and peering up like a witness, Elaine: screamed when she saw him, that slack face roused to human panic at last. Slamming the door like a spear carrier in a monster movie, she was fry too small to bother with; he had no curiosity, he did not care to know what she was like.

Almost dark, outside. Extremely cold. Streetlights giving off negative light, shining across the hood of Emily's car; why had she left her car? It was incredible, he wanted to paint everything he saw and he could see *everything.*

And there was in this world so much to see.

Was it possible to drive, like this? but he answered his own question, with vision anything is possible. Emily's car was open, the keys still in the ignition; her smell on every surface, every switch and tender knob. Russell's stupidity, buzzing stupid in his ears: you killed her. No.

There was a little dark spot on the inside of his memory that refused to come clear, it was to do with her

her hair in his mouth

one eye rolling sideways, she looked like a horse, glassy stare inhuman with fear

her face so close to his

Each man kills the thing he loves, for the thing he loves more.

Was that the passport?

Her hair in his mouth.

Slewing like a drunk, blank-eyed and he felt the passion of the child and the genius, the maniac, the king. There was nothing like this, nothing. He wanted to tell everyone he saw what he saw, wanted to show them. Most of all he wanted to tell Emily, to *show* her; she would be proud of him again. So. Gone: and maybe there across the border to be found again, in that place where all arguments have one answer; explain that there are some things, some times, greater than human good; this time she would understand.

The rearview mirror, did his vision depend still on devices? Be sure. Bending it in his thoughtful touch and in its reflection he saw the silver thing, smiling at him, revealed at last to be far more than monster or delight, to be work itself, art's goad, despoiler of waste, dispenser of sorrow to sorrow for a greater good. Why him? in his stunted silly pain, ambitionless desire, why had it chosen him to gift with silver? Because he was empty? Because he could be filled? The god: come disguised as an illness, a movement, a color.

Silver, the color of the knife that heals.

He thought he knew again the gaze of *Criosphinx,* its muzzle stretched to the rising moon there in the shadows of the small backseat, thought he saw other forms and movements, all the portraits able now to come alive through their release from the narrowness of medium, what had Russell said? It's all that one thing. It always had been, only now it was free.

The pain in his arms pleasure as they shook on the drunken wheel, no need to turn his head to see, he would see it all forever now through that torn veil of epiphanic magic that was magic to no one but him.

Something damp on his shoulder that was not blood or silver. Pressure in his head, sweet, building, like years of work, the insistent torque of dream against reality's scabby skin. Blood from his mouth. Black blood from his ears. Emily, left behind, his body now too; yes. What difference did it make? The only thing he needed was his eyes, and if vision survived them, he needed nothing, absolutely nothing at all.

He drove for almost a block and a half before actually crossing the border.

The duende does not come at all unless he sees that death is possible.
—Federico Garcia Lorca

About the Author

Kathe Koja's (underthepoppy.com) books include *The Mercury Waltz*, *The Cipher*, *Kink*, and *Under the Poppy*, which has been produced onstage and as a live immersive event.

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She's a Detroit native and lives in the area with her husband, artist Rick Lieder, and their cats.

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